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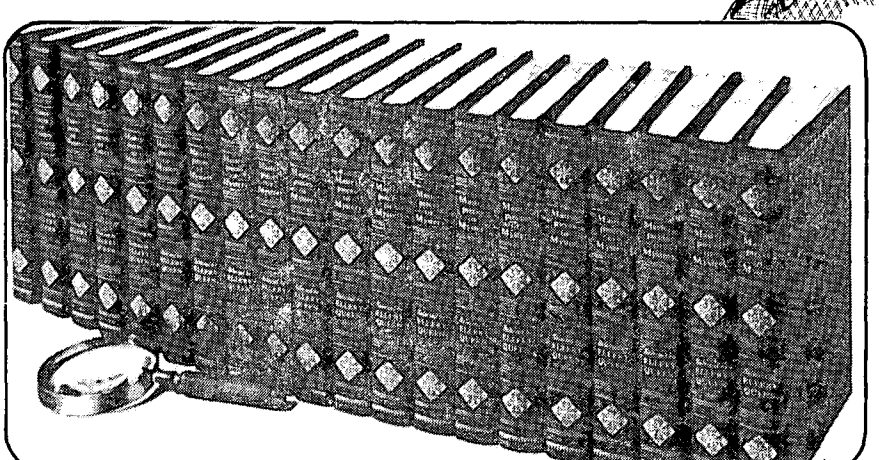

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ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY

SPRING-SUMMER 1977

EDITED BY "Ellery Queen"

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader:

Famous men and women have their Hall of Fame. Baseball, football, and other sports have their Halls of Fame. Why not the mystery story and its creators? (For years we have been urging Mystery Writers of America, Inc. to establish a Hall of Fame and to gather and display books, photographs, plaques, awards, scrolls, and personal mementoes of the Great Ones in the field; we offered to donate, among personal items, the little leather-bound pocket notebook in which Jacques Futrelle jotted down plot ideas for his stories about Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen, better known as The Thinking Machine.)

Many of the contributors to this series of anthologies, including all the Grandmasters, would qualify for niches and pedestals, and many more would deserve serious consideration. Who would deny Hall of Fame status to Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Emile Gaboriau, Anna Katharine Green, A. Conan Doyle, Israel Zangwill, E. W. Hornung, Maurice Leblanc, R. Austin Freeman, G. K. Chesterton—to mention only the first ten "old masters" who come to mind. Champions all—champions who would win nomination and election on the first ballot.

The detectives, official and amateur, in this volume are not only champions of mystery, they are champions of truth and justice, of law and order, of the underdog and the innocent. Perhaps that is the most cogent reason for their enduring popularity. Some are already enshrined in the "Valhalla of the immortals"—in that Big Club Room or Squad Room in the Sky. Some of the detectives in this anthology are true folk heroes of our time—Nero Wolfe, Inspector Maigret, Lew Archer, Sir Henry Merrivale, Ellery Queen, Nick Velvet. And as "all mankind love a lover," so the whole world loves a champion.

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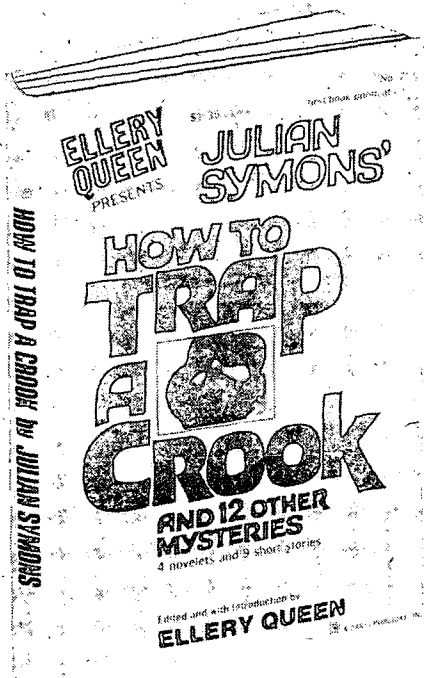
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ex Stout

Counterfeit for Murder

It started simply enough: a salty (and peppery) old character, the landlady of a theatrical roominghouse, comes to Nero Wolfe with a mysterious package; and then there's Tammy Baxter, a going-to-be actress—but learn about her for yourself . . .

Archie Goodwin was stumped. Nero Wolfe was almost stumped. But leave it to Nero: he had an "inkling," a "surmise," a "faint intimation." He told Inspector Cramer that he also "had a stroke of luck." But Nero's "luck" is not where he finds it—it's where he looks for it. Nero knew how to "invite" luck, and where "to send the invitation" . . .

Detective: NERO WOLFE

My rule is never to be rude to anyone unless you mean it. But when I looked through the one-way glass panel of the ront door and saw her out on the stoop, my basic feelings about he opposite sex were hurt. Granting that women can't stay young ınd beautiful forever, that the years are bound to show, at least hey don't have to let their gray hair straggle over their ears or vear a coat with a button missing or forget to wash their face, ınd this specimen was guilty on all three counts. So, as she put a inger to the button and the door bell rang, I opened the door and old her, "I don't want any, thanks. Try next door." I admit it was ude.

"You would have once, Buster," she said. "Thirty years ago I vas a real treat."

That didn't help matters any. I have conceded that the years ıre bound to show.

"I want to see Nero Wolfe," she said. "Do I walk right through ʏou?"

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"There are difficulties," I told her. "One, I'm bigger than yo are. Two, Mr. Wolfe can be seen only by appointment. And thre he won't be available until eleven o'clock. That's more than a hour from now."

"All right, I'll come in and wait. I'm half froze. Are you naile down?"

A notion struck me. Wolfe believes, or claims he does, that an time I talk him into seeing a female would-be client he know exactly what to expect if and when he sees her, and this woul show him how wrong he was.

"Your name, please?" I asked her.

"My name's Annis. Hattie Annis."

"What do you want to see Mr. Wolfe about?"

"I'll tell him when I see him. If my tongue's not froze."

"You'll have to tell me, Mrs. Annis. My name—"

"*Miss* Annis."

"Okay. My name is Archie Goodwin."

"I know it is. If you're thinking I don't look like I can pay Ner Wolfe, there'll be a reward and I'll split it with him. If I took it t the cops they'd do the splitting. I wouldn't trust a cop if he wa naked as a baby."

"What will the reward be for?"

"For what I've got here." She patted her black leather handbag the worse for wear, with a hand in a gray woolen glove.

"What is it?"

"I'll tell Nero Wolfe. Look, Buster, I'm no Eskimo. Let the lad in."

That wasn't feasible. I had been in the hall with my hat an overcoat and gloves on, on my way for a morning walk crosstow to the bank to deposit a check for $7417.65 in Wolfe's account when I had seen her through the one-way glass panel aiming he finger at the bell button. Letting her in and leaving her in th office while I took my walk was out of the question. The other in habitants of that old brownstone on West 35th Street, the prop erty of Nero Wolfe except for the furniture and other items in m bedroom, were around but they were busy. Fritz Brenner, the che and housekeeper, was in the kitchen making chestnut soup. Wolf was up in the plant rooms on the roof for his two-hour morning session with the orchids, and of course Theodore Horstmann wa with him.

I wasn't rude about it. I told her there were several places

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nearby where she could spend the hour and thaw out—Sam's Diner at the corner of Tenth Avenue, or the drug store at the corner of Ninth, or Tony's tailor shop where she could have a button sewed on her coat and charge it to me. She didn't push. I said if she came back at a quarter past eleven I might have persuaded Wolfe to see her, and she turned to go, and then turned back, opened the black leather handbag, and took out a package wrapped in brown paper with a string around it.

"Keep this for me, Buster," she said. "Some nosey cop might take it on himself. Come on, it won't bite. And don't open it. Can I trust you not to open it?"

I took it because I liked her. She had fine instincts and no sense at all. She had refused to tell me what was in it, and was leaving it with me and telling me not to open it—my idea of a true woman if only she would comb her hair and wash her face and sew a button on. So I took it, and told her I would expect her at a quarter past eleven, and she went.

When I had seen her descend the seven steps to the sidewalk and turn left, toward Tenth Avenue, I shut the door from the inside and took a look at the package. It was rectangular, some six inches long and three wide, and a couple of inches thick. I put it to my ear and held my breath, and heard nothing. But you never know what science will do next, and there were at least three dozen people in the metropolitan area who had it in for Wolfe, not to mention a few who didn't care much for me, so instead of taking it to the office, to my desk or the safe, I went to the front room and stashed it under the couch. If you ask if I untied the string and unwrapped the paper for a look, your instincts are not as fine as they should be. Anyhow, I had gloves on.

Also there had been nothing doing for more than a week, since we had cleaned up the Brigham forgery case, and my mind needed exercise as much as my legs and lungs, so walking crosstown and back I figured out what was in the package. After discarding a dozen guesses that didn't appeal to me I decided it was the Hope diamond. The one that had been sent to Washington was a phony, I was still working on various details, such as Hattie Annis' real name and station and how she had got hold of it, on the last stretch approaching the old brownstone, and therefore got nearly to the stoop before I saw that it was occupied.

Perched on the top step was exactly the kind of female Wolfe expects to see when I talk him into seeing one. The right age, the

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right face, the right legs—what showed of them below the edge of her fur coat. The coat was not mink or sable. As I started to mount she got up.

"Well," she said. "A grand idea, this outdoor waiting room, but there ought to be magazines."

I reached her level. The top of her fuzzy little turban was even with my nose. "I suppose you rang?" I asked.

"I did. And was told through a crack that Mr. Wolfe was engaged and Mr. Goodwin was out. Mr. Goodwin, I presume?"

"Right." I had my key ring out. "I'll bring some magazines. Which ones do you like?"

"Let's go in and look them over."

Wolfe wouldn't be down for more than half an hour, and it would be interesting to know what she was selling, so I used the key on the door and swung it open. When I had disposed of my hat and coat on the hall rack I ushered her to the office, moved one of the yellow chairs up for her, and went to my desk and sat.

"We have no vacancies at the moment," I said, "but you can leave your number. Don't call us, we'll call—"

"That's pretty corny," she said. She had thrown her coat open to drape it over the back of the chair, revealing other personal details that went fine with the face and legs.

"Okay," I conceded. "It's your turn."

"My name is Tammy Baxter. Short for Tamiris. I haven't decided yet which one to use on a theater program when the time comes. What do you think, Tammy or Tamiris?"

"It would depend on the part. If it's the lead in a musical, Tammy. If it packs some weight, O'Neill for instance, Tamiris."

"It's more apt to be a girl at one of the tables in the night-club scene. The one who jumps up and says, 'Come on, Bill, let's get out of here.' That's her big line." She fluttered a gloved hand. "Oh, well. What do you care? Why don't you ask me what I want?"

"I'm putting it off because I may not have it."

"That's nice. I like that. That's a good line, only you threw it away. There should be a pause after 'off.' 'I'm putting it off . . . because I may not have it.' Try it again."

"Nuts. I said it the way I felt it. You actresses are all alike. I was getting a sociable feeling about you and look what you've done to it. What do you want?"

She laughed a little ripple. "I'm not an actress, I'm only going

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to be. I don't want anything much, just to ask about my landlady. Miss Annis—Hattie Annis. Has she been here?"

I raised a brow. "Here? When?"

"This morning."

"I'll ask." I turned my head and sang out, "Fritz!" and when he appeared in the doorway to the hall I inquired, "Did anyone besides this lady come while I was out?"

"No, sir." He always sirs me when there is company, and I can't make him stop.

"Any phone calls?"

"No, sir."

"Okay. Thank you, sir." He went, and I told Tammy or Tamiris. "Apparently not. You say your landlady?"

She nodded. "That's funny."

"Why, did you tell her to come?"

"No, she told me. She said she was going to take something—she was going to see Nero Wolfe about something. She wouldn't say what, and after she left I began to worry about her. She never got here?"

"You heard what Fritz said. Why should you worry?"

"You would too if you knew her. She almost never leaves the house, and she never goes more than a block away. She's not a loony, really, but she's not quite all there, and I should have come with her. We all feel responsible for her. Her house is an awful dump, but anybody in show business, or even trying to be, can have a room for five dollars a week, and it doesn't have to be every week. So we feel responsible. I certainly hope—" She stood up, letting it hang. "If she comes will you phone me?"

"Sure. She gave me the number and I jotted it down, and then went to hold her coat. My feelings were mixed. It would have been a pleasure to relieve her mind, but of what? What if her real worry was about the Hope diamond, which she had had under her mattress, and she knew or suspected that Hattie Annis had snitched it? I would have liked to put her in the front room, supplied with magazines, to wait until the landlady arrived, but you can't afford to be sentimental when the fate of a million-dollar diamond is at stake, so I let her go.

Another consideration was that it would be enough of a job to sell Wolfe on seeing Hattie Annis without also accounting for the presence of another female in the front room. He can stand having one woman under his roof temporarily, but not two at once.

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At eleven o'clock on the nose the sound of the elevator came, then its usual clang as it jolted to a stop at the bottom, and he entered, told me good morning, went to his desk, got his seventh of a ton deposited in the oversized custom-built chair, fingered through the mail, glanced at his desk calendar, and spoke.

"No check from Brigham?"

"Yes, sir, it came." I swiveled to face him. "Without comment. I took it to the bank. Also my weakness has cropped up again, but with a new slant."

He grunted. "Which weakness?"

"Women. One came, a stranger, and I told her to come back at eleven fifteen. The trouble is, she's a type that never appealed to me before. I hope to goodness my taste hasn't shifted. I want your opinion."

"Pfui. Flummery."

"No, sir. It's a real problem. Wait till you see her."

"I'm not going to see her."

"Then I'm stuck. She has a strange fascination. Nobody believes in witches casting spells any more. I certainly don't, but I don't know. As for what she wants to see you about, that's simple. She has got something that she thinks is good for a reward, and she's coming to you instead of the police because she hates cops. I don't know what it is or where she got it. That part's easy, you can deal with that in two minutes, but what about me? Have I got a screw loose?"

"Yes." He picked up the top item from the little pile of mail, an airmail letter from an orchid hunter in Venezuela, and started to read it. I swung my chair around and started sharpening pencils that didn't need it. The noise of the sharpener gets on his nerves. I was on the fourth pencil when his voice came.

"Stop that," he growled. "A witch?"

"She must be."

"I'll give her two minutes."

You can appreciate what I had accomplished only if you know how allergic he is to strangers, especially women, and how much he hates to work, especially when a respectable check has just been deposited. Besides that satisfaction I had something to look forward to, seeing his expression when I escorted Hattie Annis in. I thought I might as well go and retrieve the package from under the couch and put it in my desk drawer, but vetoed it. It could stay put till she came. Wolfe finished the letter from the orchid

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hunter and started on a circular from a manufacturer of a humidifier.

Eleven seventeen and the bell didn't ring. At 11:20 Wolfe looked up to say that he had some letters to give me but didn't like to be interrupted, and I said neither did I. At 11:25 he got up and went to the kitchen, probably to sample the chestnut soup, in which he and Fritz had decided to include tarragon for the first time.

At 11:30 I went to the front room and got the package. Nuts to her, if she couldn't be punctual for an appointment. She would get her package back, at the door, and that would be all. I was straightening up after fishing it from under the couch when the bell rang, and I had it in my hand when I went to the hall.

It was her all right, but through the one-way glass panel I noticed a couple of changes as I stepped to the door: there was a button on her coat where one had been missing, and her face needed washing even more than it had before. Her whole right cheek was a dark smudge. Touched by the button, I decided to hear her excuse for being late, if any, but as I opened the door she collapsed. No moan, no sound at all, she just crumpled.

I jumped and grabbed her, so she didn't go clear down, but she was out, dead weight. I tightened my right arm around her to free my left to toss the package into the hall and then gathered her up, crossed the sill, and kicked the door shut.

As I was turning to the front room Wolfe's voice came. "What the devil is that?"

"A woman," I said, and kept going. On her feet I would have guessed her at not more than a hundred and fifteen pounds, but loose and sagging she was a good deal heavier. I put her on the couch, on her back, straightened her legs, and took a look. She was breathing shallow, but not gasping. I slipped a hand under her middle and lifted, and stuffed a couple of cushions beneath her hips. As I took her wrist and put a finger on her pulse Wolfe's voice came at my back.

"Get Doctor Vollmer."

I turned my head. He had meant it for Fritz, who had appeared at the door. "Hold it," I said. "I think she just fainted."

"Nonsense," Wolfe snapped. "Women do not faint."

I had heard that one before. His basis for it was not medical but personal; he is convinced that unless she has a really good excuse, like being slugged with a club, any woman who passes out is

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merely putting on an act—a subhead under his fundamental principle that every woman is always putting on an act. Ignoring it, I checked her pulse, which was weak and slow but not too bad, asked Fritz to bring my overcoat and open a window, and went to the lavatory for the smelling salts. I was waving the bottle under her nose and Fritz was spreading the coat over her when her eyes opened. She blinked at me and started to lift her head, and I put my hand on her brow.

"I know you," she said, barely audible. "I must have made it."

"Only to the door," I told her. "You flopped on the stoop and I carried you in. Lie still. Shut your eyes and catch up on your breathing."

"Brandy?" Fritz asked me.

"I don't like brandy," she said.

"Tea?"

"I don't like tea. Where's my bag?"

"Coffee," I told Fritz. "She must like something." He went. Wolfe had disappeared. "Sniff this." I told her, handing her the bottle, and went to the hall. The package was over by the rack, and her handbag was on the floor near the wall. I didn't know how it got there, and I still don't, but since I reject Wolfe's fundamental principle I assume that a fainting woman can hang onto something.

Returning to the patient I was just in time to keep her from rolling off the couch. She was trying to pull the cushions out from under her middle. When I put a hand on her shoulder she protested. "Pillows are for heads, Buster. Can't you tell my head from my fanny? Give me the bag."

I handed it to her and she turned onto her side, propping on her elbow, to open it. Apparently her concern was for a particular item, for after a brief glance inside she was closing it, but I said, "Here, put this in," and offered the package.

She didn't take it. "So I'm still alive," she said. "I'm froze stiff, but I'm alive. Don't Nero Wolfe believe in heat?"

"It's seventy in here," I told her. "When you faint your blood does something. Here's your package."

"Did you open it?"

"No."

"I knew you wouldn't. I'm still dizzy." Her head went back down. "You're such a detective, maybe you can tell me what he was going to do if he killed me. He would have had to stop the car

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nd get out to get the bag. Wouldn't he?"

"I should think so. If it was the bag he wanted."

"Of course it was." She took a deep breath, and another. "He hought the package was in it. Anyhow, it was your fault I was here, what you said about the button. I've been intending to sew hat button on for a month, and when you said to have one put on nd charge it to you, that was too much. I hadn't done anything bout my clothes on account of a man for twenty years, and here vas a man offering to buy me a button. So I went home and ewed it on."

She stopped to breathe. I stuck the package in my pocket. Where is home?" I asked.

"Forty-seventh Street. Between Eighth and Ninth. So that's vhy I was there, but you keep your head, Buster. Don't offer to uy me some hair dye. When I left I was going to take a Ninth venue bus to come back here, and walking along Forty-seventh treet the car came on the sidewalk behind me and hit me here." he touched her right hip. "Bumping up over the curb must have poiled his aim. It didn't hit me hard enough to knock me down, o I must have stumbled when I jumped. Anyhow, I fell, and I nust have rolled over more than once because I was walking near he curb and I came against a building. Is that Nero Wolfe?"

The door to the office had opened and Wolfe was there, scowling t us. I told her yes, and told him, "Miss Hattie Annis. She's tell- ng me why she was late for her appointment. She went to her ouse on Forty-seventh Street, and coming back a car climbed the urb and hit her. I know there's no chair here big enough for you, ut she ought to stay flat a little longer."

"I am capable of standing for two minutes," he said stiffly.

"You don't look it," Hattie said. "You would do fine for alstaff."

"Finish it," I told her. "And the car went on?"

"It must have. When I got up it was gone. A man and a woman elped me up, and another man stopped, but nothing was broke nd I could walk. So I walked. I didn't want to try climbing on a us. I kept in close to the buildings, and I stopped to rest about very block, and the last two blocks I didn't think I would make t, but I did. How did you know I was there if I fainted?"

"You rang the bell. I caught you before you hit bottom."

"And you carried me in and I missed it. Carried by a man and lidn't know it. What's life up to?"

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Wolfe came in a step. "Madam. I told Mr. Goodwin I would giv you two minutes."

She had lifted her head and I had put a cushion under it. "I ap preciate it," she said. "A wonderful day. Buster carries me in an Falstaff gives me two minutes—and here's another one with cof fee!"

Fritz coming with the coffee eased the situation. To Wolfe any one having food or drink in his house is a guest, and guests hav to be humored, within reason. He couldn't tell me to bounce he while I was bringing a stand for the tray and Fritz was filling he cup. So he stood and scowled. When she had taken a sip he spoke

"Mr. Goodwin said you have something that you think is goo for a reward. What is it?"

She had sat up and taken off the woolen gloves. She tool another sip. "That's good coffee," she said. "First I'll tell you how got it. I own that house on Forty-seventh Street. I was born in it. Another sip. "Do you happen to know that all stage people ar crazy?"

Wolfe grunted. "They have no monopoly."

"Maybe not, but theirs is a special kind. I'm not saying I like them but they give me a feeling. My father owned a theater. My house is only an eight-minute walk from Times Square, and only need one room and a kitchen, so they can live there whethe they can pay or not. Five of them are living there now—three men and two girls—and they use the kitchen. They're supposed t make their beds and keep their rooms decent, and some of then do. I never go in their rooms. My room is the second floor front—"

"If you please." Wolfe was curt. "To the point."

"I'll get there, Falstaff. Let the lady talk." She took a sip. "Good coffee. The ground floor front is the parlor. Nobody goes in ther much since my mother died years ago, but once a week I go in and look around, and when I went in yesterday afternoon a mous ran out from under the piano and went in back of the book shelves. Do you believe a mouse could run up a woman's leg?"

"No." Wolfe was emphatic.

"Neither do I. I got my umbrella from the hall and poked be hind the shelves, but he didn't come out. There's no back to the shelves, so if I took the books out I'd have him. The bottom shel has a History of the Thirteen Colonies in ten volumes and a set o Macaulay with the backs coming off. I took them all out, but the mouse wasn't there. He must have moved while I was getting the

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umbrella. But in back of the books was a little package I had never seen before, and I opened it, and that's what I've got. If I took it to the cops, goodbye. We can split the reward three ways, you and me and Buster here.

"What's in it?"

Her head turned. "Open it, Buster."

I took it from my pocket, sat on a chair, untied the string, and unwrapped the paper. It was a stack of new twenty-dollar bills. I flipped through it at a corner and then at another corner. All twenties.

"Imagine handing that to the cops," Hattie said. "Of course he knew I had it and he tried to kill me."

Wolfe grunted. "How much, Archie?"

"About two inches thick. Two hundred and fifty to the inch. Ten thousand dollars, more or less."

"Madam. You say he tried to kill you. Who?"

"I don't know which one." She put her cup down and picked up the pot to pour. "It could be one of the girls, but I'd rather not. If he hadn't tried to kill me I would just as soon—"

The doorbell rang. After putting the lettuce and paper and string on the chair I went to the hall and took a look. It was a medium-sized round-shouldered stranger in a dark gray overcoat and a snap brim nearly down to his ears. Before opening the door I shut the one to the front room.

"Yes, sir?"

He took a leather fold from a pocket, flipped it open, and offered it. I took it. Treasury Department of the United States. Secret Service Division. Albert Leach. In the picture he had no hat on, but it was probably him. I handed it back.

"My name is Albert Leach," he said.

"Check," I said.

"I'd like to speak with Mr. Wolfe and Mr. Goodwin."

"Mr. Wolfe isn't available. I'm Goodwin."

"May I come in?"

It was a little ticklish. Of course I had smelled a rat the second I saw his credentials. The walls and doors on that floor were all soundproofed, but with Wolfe and Hattie in there together there was no telling, and I didn't want him inside. But it had started to snow and the stoop had no roof, and I certainly wanted to know what was on his mind.

I gave him room and he stepped in. "I'm sorry," I said, "but Mr.

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Wolfe is busy and I'm helping him with something, so if you'll tell me—"

"Certainly." He had removed his hat. His hair was going, but it would be a couple of years before he could be called bald. "I want to ask about a woman named Baxter. Tamiris Baxter or Tammy Baxter. Is she here?"

"No. Around twenty-five? Five feet four, light brown hair, hazel eyes, hundred and twenty pounds, fur coat and fuzzy turban?"

He nodded. "That fits her."

"She was here this morning. She came at twenty minutes past ten, uninvited and unexpected, and left at ten thirty."

"Has she been back?"

"No."

"Has she phoned?"

"No."

"Another woman named Annis, Hattie Annis. Has she been here?"

I cocked my head. "You know, Mr. Leach, I don't mind being polite, but what the hell. Mr. Wolfe is a licensed private detective and so am I, and we don't answer miscellaneous questions just to pass the time. I've heard of Hattie Annis because Miss Baxter asked if she had been here, and I told her no. She asked me to phone her if she came, but I probably won't. What if this Hattie Annis comes and hires Mr. Wolfe to do a job? She might not want anyone to know she had been here. So skip it."

"I'm an officer of the law, Goodwin. I'm an agent of the United States government."

"So you are. And?"

"I want to know if Hattie Annis has been here today."

"Ask her. Miss Baxter gave me the phone number. Do you want it?"

"I have it." He put his hat on. "I know your reputation, Goodwin, and Wolfe's. You may get away with fancy tricks with the New York Police Department, but I advise you not to try any with the Secret Service." He turned and went, leaving the door open.

I shut the door and then went to the office. I got the best magnifying glass from a drawer of Wolfe's desk and a new twenty-dollar bill from the safe, and proceeded to the front room. Wolfe was still standing, scowling down at her, and she was talking. She broke off as I entered and turned to me. "You're just in time,

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Buster. He's trying to tell me there may be no reward, and I never heard of—what are you doing?"

I had picked up the stack of bills and was going to a window. Putting the one on top side by side with the one I had taken from the safe, one minute with the glass settled it. I took the one from the bottom of the stack and one from the middle, and used the glass on them. The same. I stuck the good one in my pocket and crossed to them.

"There'll probably be an award," I told her. "Official. They're phonies. Counterfeit."

I told a friend of mine about this incident one day a few weeks later, and when I got this far I asked her to guess what Hattie's reaction had been. "That's easy," my friend said. "She accused you of taking good bills from the package and substituting bad ones. You should have known she would."

My friend couldn't have been more wrong, but I admit it was my fault. I hadn't drawn Hattie true to life. What Hattie actually said was, "Of course they're counterfeit. Why would he hide real money in my parlor? And why would I bring it to Nero Wolfe?"

"You knew they were phonies?" I demanded.

"I knew they must be."

"You didn't mention it."

"Why should I? To you two great detectives? You knew it too or you wouldn't have examined them with a magnifying glass."

I shook my head. "I didn't know it, I only suspected it. I suspected it when I answered the bell just now and found a T-man at the door. A T-man is a Secret Service agent of the Treasury Department. He wanted to know if a woman named Tamiris Baxter was here. I told him no, that she was here this morning for ten minutes and left her—"

"Tammy Baxter? Tammy was here?"

"Right. She wanted to know if you had been here and I told her no. She left her phone number and asked me to ring her if you came. Then the T-man asked if Hattie Annis had been here, and I told him I was against answering miscellaneous questions, which is true, but the thing was, I had got curious about this stack of bills and wanted to take a look. So he left and I came and looked. Now you say you knew they were counterfeit."

"Archie," Wolfe was gruff. "You saw that man's credentials?"

"Of course."

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"He asked for Miss Annis?"

"He asked if she had been here."

"Why didn't you bring him in?"

"Because I wanted to look at the bills. If they were okay I saw no reason to let a T-man disturb a guest of yours who appreciates Fritz's coffee."

The trouble was, she had finished the coffee. "Very well," he said, "you have looked at them. Does the Secret Service have a New York office?"

"Yes." A list of the things any two-bit dick knows and he doesn't would fill a book.

"Call them and report. If Miss Annis leaves before they arrive, keep the bills, and of course they will want the wrapping paper. Give her a receipt if she wants one." He turned and made for the office, shutting the door.

It didn't stay shut long. I admit I could have stopped her, by taking a step and stretching an arm, but I thought he might at least have given her a chance to thank him for the coffee. So I didn't take the step until she had the door open, and then went only to the sill. Wolfe was in his chair behind his desk before he knew she was there.

"Did you mean that?" she demanded. "Call the cops and hand it over?"

"Not the cops, madam." He was sharp. "The Secret Service. I have a responsibility as a citizen. Counterfeit money is contraband. I can't let you walk out of my house with it."

She put a hand on the desk edge for a prop. "Bootlicker," she said. "The great detective Nero Wolfe just a flunky for the cops. If Falstaff was here I'd apologize to him. Maybe he wasn't much of a hero, but he was no toady. You can't glare me down, the lady's going to talk. I found that stuff in my house, and I thought, I'd rather just burn it than turn it over to the cops. I thought the thing to do was find out who put it there and then go to a newspaper. Finding a counterfeiter ought to call for a reward.

"But I didn't know how to find out because my mind doesn't work like that, so I thought I would get a detective and split the reward with him, and I might as well get the best, so I go to Nero Wolfe, and this is what happens. Counterfeit money may be contraband, but it's not your counterfeit money, it's mine. I found it in my house, but what do you care, you want to suck up to the cops, so you tell him to call them and report, and keep the bills,

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and swaggle out. I spit at you. I don't spit, but I spit at you." She about-faced. "You too, Buster. Is this what you carried me in for?"

"Madam," Wolfe said.

She whirled back. "Don't madam me!"

"You have a point," Wolfe said. "I reject your charge of servility, but you have a point, and an interesting one. I am not an officer of the law. Has a private citizen the right to confiscate contraband? I doubt it. Even if he has the right, is it a duty? Surely not. That counterfeit money is yours until it is seized by public authority. I confess to error, but I was prompted by expedience, not sycophancy. I merely wanted to get clear of a muddle. Now, confound it, you have raised a point I can't ignore, but neither can I ignore my obligation as a citizen.

"I offer a suggestion: Mr. Goodwin will put the bills in my safe and go with you to your house and investigate. You say you wanted to engage me to identify and expose the counterfeiter; he will decide if that is feasible without prolonged and expensive inquiry. If it isn't I'll return your property to you, but I shall notify the Secret Service that I am doing so. In either case I shall expect no fee. You are not my client. I am merely wriggling out of a muddle. Well?"

"We split the reward three ways," she said.

"I have no interest in a reward." He flipped a hand, discarding it. "There probably won't be any."

"There had better be. I don't need it. I've got enough to go on and then some, but I've never earned any money and this is my chance. Keeping it in your safe, that's all right. I'm not going to apologize for what I said until I see what happens."

"I wouldn't expect you to. Archie?"

I moved. The bills were still in my hand, but the wrapping paper and string were on the chair. I went and brought them, holding the paper by a corner. "A question," I said. "Since he hid it where it might possibly be found he might have had sense enough not to leave prints, but he might not. If not, I've got him right here. I can find out in ten minutes, but it would be tampering with evidence, and the question is, do I?"

"Of course," Hattie said. "I thought of that but I didn't know how."

"You can't test it without leaving traces," Wolfe said.

"No."

"Then don't. That can wait."

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Of course my prints were already there, on both the bills and the paper, but there was no point in adding more, so I took care putting them in the safe. I asked Wolfe if he had any instructions, and when he said no, I knew what the situation required.

I got Hattie's bag and gloves from the front room, she hadn't taken her coat off. I thought I might as well try her pulse, but she wouldn't let me. When I showed her to the lavatory to look in the mirror she had to admit her face could stand some attention, and when she came out the smudge was gone and she had even tucked her hair in some.

Walking to Tenth Avenue for a taxi she limped a little, but she said it was nothing, just that her hip had a sore spot. When we were stopped by a red light at 38th Street the sight of a harness bull on the sidewalk prompted her to explain why she was so down on him and his. I got it that her father had been shot by one without provocation, but she seemed a little hazy about the details, and I was more interested in something else: what did she know of Tammy Baxter? She must be involved somehow, since the T-man wanted her.

Hattie said no, it couldn't be Tammy, because she only had one suit, two dresses, three blouses, and two skirts, and her fur coat was rabbit, and if she were a counterfeiter she would have more clothes. I conceded that that was pretty decisive, but why was the T-man interested in her? How long had she been living in Hattie's house? Three weeks. What did Hattie know of her background and history? Nothing. Hattie never asked for references. When someone came and wanted a place to sleep she just sized him up. Or her.

The other four current roomers had all been there longer—one of them, Raymond Dell, more than three years. In the thirties Dell had always had enough work to lunch at Sardi's twice a week, and in the forties he had done fairly well in Hollywood; but now he was down to a few TV crumbs.

Noel Ferris, a year and a half. A year ago he had been in a play which had folded in four days, and this season in one which had lasted two weeks.

Paul Hannah, four months. A kid in his early twenties with no Broadway record. He was rehearsing in a show that was to open next month at an off-Broadway theater, the Mushroom.

Martha Kirk, eleven months. Twenty years old. Was in *Short and Sweet* for a year. Now studying at the Eastern Ballet Studio.

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That was what I had got when the taxi rolled to the curb in 47th ;reet. Tammy Baxter had said the house was a dump, and it as, like hundreds of others in that part of town. The wind hirled some snow into the vestibule when I pushed the door ɔen. Hattie used her key on the inner door and we entered. I had ld her that I would first take a look at the bookshelf, to see if ıe dust situation could furnish any information as to how long ıe package had been there, but as we were taking off our coats ı the hall a voice came booming down the stairs.

"Is that you, Hattie?"

The owner of the voice was following it down. He was a tall ıin guy with a marvelous mane of wavy white hair, in an an- ent blue dressing gown with spots on it. He was rumbling, Where on earth have you been, or above it or beneath? Without ɔu this house is a sepulcher! There are no oranges." He noticed ıe. "How do you do, sir."

"Mr. Goodwin, Mr. Dell," Hattie said. I started to offer a hand, ut he was bowing, so I bowed instead. A voice sounded behind ıe. "This way for oranges, Ray! I got some. Good morning, attie—I mean good afternoon."

Raymond Dell headed for the rear of the hall, where a girl was anding in a doorway, and when Hattie followed him I tagged long, on into the kitchen. On a big linoleum-topped table in the enter a large brass bowl was piled high with oranges, and by the me I entered Dell had taken one and started to peel it. There as a smell of coffee.

"Miss Kirk, Mr. Goodwin," Hattie said.

Martha Kirk barely looked her twenty. She was ornamental oth above the neck and below, with matching dimples. She gave ıe a glance and a nod, and asked Hattie, "Do you know where ammy is? Two phone calls. A man, no name."

Hattie said she didn't know. Dell looked up from his orange to ımble at me, "You're a civilian, Mr. Goodwin?"

It was a well-put question, since if I wasn't in show business my eply would show whether I was close enough to it to know that tage people call outsiders civilians. But Hattie replied for me.

"You watch your tongue with Mr. Goodwin," she told him. "He hinks he's going to do a piece for a magazine about me and my ouse, and that's why he's here. We're all going to be famous. here'll be a picture of us with Carol Jasper. She lived here early a year."

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"What magazine?" Dell demanded. Martha Kirk skipped aroun the table to curtsy to me. "What would you like?" she asked. "A omelet of larks' eggs? With truffles?"

I was a little sorry I had suggested that explanation of me t Hattie. It would be a shame to disappoint a girl who could curts like that. "You'd better save it," I said. "This egg not only hasn hatched, it's not even laid yet."

Raymond Dell was boring holes through me with deep-se blue-gray eyes. "I wouldn't have my picture taken with Carc Jasper," he said, "for all the gold of Ormuz and of Ind."

"You can squat down behind," Hattie said. "Come on, Mr Goodwin." She moved. "He wants to see the house. I hope the bed are made."

I said I'd see them later and followed her out. Halfway dow the hall she asked, not lowering her voice, "How was that? Al right?"

"Fine," I said, loud enough to carry back. "They're interested and that'll help."

She stopped at a door on the left toward the front, opened it and went in. I followed and closed the door. The window blinds were down and it was almost as dark as night, but she flipped a wall switch and light came from a cluster of bulbs in the ceiling. glanced around. A sofa, dark red plush or velvet, chairs to match a fireplace with a marble mantel; worn and faded carpet; an up right piano against the wall on the right, and, beyond the piano shelves of books.

"Here," Hattie said, and went to the shelves. "I put the books back like they were." As I moved to join her the corner of my eye caught something, and I turned my head; and, seeing it, I turned more and then froze. It was Tammy Baxter, flat on the floor be hind the sofa, staring up at the ceiling; and, as if to show her where to stare, the handle of a knife at right angles to her chest was pointing straight at the cluster of lights.

To show you how freaky a human mind can be, as if you didn't already know, the thought that popped into mine was that Hattie had been right: a counterfeiter would have more clothes; and what brought it was the fact that Tammy's skirt was nearly to her waist, exposing her legs. That took the first tenth of a second. The next thought was also of Hattie, just as freaky but for men only, based on the strictly male notion that women aren't tough

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nough to take the sight of a corpse. I turned, and she was there t my elbow, staring down at it.

"That's a knife," she said.

That plain statement of fact brought my mind to. I went and quatted, lifted Tammy's hand, and pressed hard on the humbnail. When I released the pressure it stayed white. The ead hand flopped back to the carpet and I stood up. I glanced at ıy wrist: twelve minutes past one. "You'll see the cops now," I aid. "If you don't want— Hands off! Don't touch her!"

"I won't," she said, and didn't. She only touched the skirt, the em, to pull it down, but it was bunched underneath and would ome only to the knees.

"It's your house," I said, "so you ought to phone, but I will if ou prefer."

"Phone for a cop?"

"Yes."

"Do you have to?"

"Certainly."

She went to a chair and sat. "This is the way it goes," she said. It always has. When I want to think I can't. But you can, Buster, hat's your business. You ought to be able to think of something ɔetter than calling a cop."

"I'm afraid I can't, Hattie." I stopped. I hadn't realized she had ɔecome Hattie to me until I heard it come out. I went on, "But irst a couple of questions, in case some thinking is called for la- er. When you came back here this morning to sew on the button, lid you see Tammy?"

"No."

"Did you see anybody?"

"No."

"The car that came up on the sidewalk and hit you. Did you see he driver?"

"Now, how could I? It came from behind."

"The man and woman who helped you up, and the other man. Did they see the driver?"

"No, I asked them. They said they didn't. I can't think about hat, I'm thinking about this. We'll go up to my room. Ray and Martha don't know we came in here. We'll go up to my room and you'll think of something."

"I can't think her alive and I can't think her body somewhere else. If you mean we forget we came in and saw it, then what?

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You said nobody comes in here much. Do you phone or do I?"

Her mouth worked. "You're no good, Buster. I wish I hadn' sewed that button on." She got to her feet, none too steady. "I'n going upstairs, and I'm not going to see any cops."

She moved, but not toward the door. She stood and looked dow at the corpse, and said, "It's not your fault, Tammy. Your nam won't ever be on a marquee now." She moved again, stopped a the door to say, "The phone's in the hall," and went.

I looked around. There was no sign of a struggle. There wa nothing to be seen that might not have belonged to the room— Tammy's handbag, for instance. I went and squatted by her for a look at the knife handle; it was plain black wood, four inche long, the kind for a large kitchen knife. It was clear in to th handle and there was no blood.

I got erect and went to the hall, where I had noticed the phon on a stand under the stairs. Voices were coming from the kitchen That it wasn't a coin phone, out in the open in that house, wa worthy of remark; either Hattie's roomers could be trusted not t take liberties, or she could afford not to take care if they did Only now, evidently, one of them had taken the liberty of sticking a knife in Tammy Baxter. I dialed the number I knew best.

"Yes?"

I have tried to persuade Wolfe that is no way to answer the phone, with no success. "Me," I said. "Calling from Miss Annis house to report a complication. We went in the parlor to look at the bookshelf and found Tammy Baxter on the floor with a knife in her chest. The girl that came this morning to ask if Miss Annis had been there and that the T-man asked about. Miss Annis won't call the police, so I have to. I am keeping my voice low because this phone is in the hall and there are people in the kitchen with the door open. I have my eye on it. I need instructions. You told Miss Annis you would return her property to her, and you like to do what you say you'll do. So when I answer questions what do I save?"

"Again," he growled.

"Again what?"

"Again you. Your talent for dancing merrily into a bog is extraordinary. Why the deuce should you save anything? Save for what?"

"I'm not dancing and I'm not merry. You sent me here. In one minute, possibly two, it would occur to you as it has to me that it

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would be a nuisance to have to explain why we postponed reporting that counterfeit money. I could omit the detail that I inspected it and found it was counterfeit. If and when the question is put I could deny it."

"Pfui. That woman."

"It would be two against one, if it came to that, but I don't think it will. She says she's not going to see any cops and has gone to her room. Of course she'll see them, or they'll see her, but I doubt if they'll hear much. Her attitude toward cops is drastic. One will get you ten that she won't even tell them where she went this morning. But if you would prefer to open the bag—"

"I would prefer to obliterate the entire episode. Confound it. Very well. Omit that detail."

"Right. I'll be home when I get there."

I cradled the phone and stood and frowned at it. A citizen finding a dead body is supposed to report it at once, and in addition to being a citizen I was a licensed private detective; but another five minutes wouldn't hang me. Raymond Dell's boom was still coming from the kitchen. Hattie had said her room was the second floor front. I went to the stairs, mounted a flight, turned right in the upper hall, and tapped on a door.

Her voice came. "Who is it?"

"Goodwin. Buster to you."

"What do you want? Are you alone?"

"I'm alone and I want to ask you something."

The sound of footsteps, then of a sliding bolt that needed oiling, and the door opened. I entered and she closed the door and bolted it. "They haven't come yet," I said. "I phoned Mr. Wolfe to suggest that it would simplify matters if we leave out one item, that we knew the bills were counterfeit. Including you. That hadn't occurred to us. If you admit you knew or suspected they were phony, it will be a lot more unpleasant. So I thought I'd—"

"Who would I admit it to?"

"The cops. Naturally."

"I'm not going to admit anything to the cops. I'm not going to see any cops."

"Good for you." There was no point in telling her how wrong she was. "If you change your mind, remember that we didn't know the money was counterfeit. I'm sorry I'm no good."

I went, shutting the door, and as I headed for the stairs I heard the bolt slide home. In the lower hall voices still came from the

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kitchen. I went to the phone, dialed Watkins 9-8241, got it, gave my name, asked for Sergeant Stebbins, and after a short wait had him.

"Goodwin? I'm busy."

"You're going to be busier. I thought it would save time to bypass headquarters. I'm calling from the house of Miss Hattie Annis, Six-twenty-eight West Forty-seventh Street. There's a dead body here in the parlor—a woman with a knife in her chest. DOA—that is, *my* arrival. I'm leaving to get a bit of lunch."

"You are like hell. You again. I needed this. This was all I needed." He pronounced a word which it is a misdemeanor to use on the telephone. "You're staying there, and you're keeping your hands off. Of course you discovered it."

"Not of course. Just I discovered it."

He pronounced another contraband word. "Repeat that address."

I repeated it. The connection went. As I hung up, a notion struck me. Hattie wasn't there to call me a bootlicker and flunky and toady, and it wouldn't hurt to be polite; and besides, it would be interesting and instructive to see how Stebbins would react to outside authority sticking a finger in his pie. So I got the phone book from the stand, found the number, and dialed it.

A man's voice answered. "Rector two, nine one hundred."

Being discreet. Liking it plain, I asked, "Secret Service Division?"

"Yes."

"I would like to speak to Mr. Albert Leach."

"Mr. Leach isn't in at the moment. Who is this, please?"

My reply was delayed because my attention was diverted. The front door had opened and a man had entered; and hearing my voice he had approached for a look. I looked back. He was young and handsome—Broadway handsome. The phone repeated, "Who is this, please?"

"My name is Archie Goodwin. I have a message for Mr. Leach. He asked me this morning about a woman named Tammy Baxter. Tell him that Miss Baxter is dead. Murdered. Her body was discovered in the parlor of the house where she lived on Forty-seventh Street. I have just notified the police. I thought Mr. Leach—"

I dropped the phone on the cradle, moved, and called, "Hey, you! Hold it!"

The handsome young man, halfway to the parlor door, stopped

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and wheeled; and at the rear of the hall there were steps and Martha Kirk's voice, and she came trotting, the trot of a dancer, with Raymond Dell striding at her heels. As I crossed the hall a buzzer sounded in the kitchen, and I went and opened the door. It was two harness bulls. They stepped in and the one in front spoke. "Are you Archie Goodwin?"

"I am." I pointed to the parlor door. "In there."

Two hours later, at twenty minutes to four, as I sat at the big table in the kitchen eating crackers and cheese and raspberry preserves, and drinking coffee, Inspector Cramer of Homicide West sent for me to ask me a favor. Very few people or situations had ever got Cramer to the point of asking a favor of me, but Hattie Annis had managed it.

With me at the table were two of the roomers, Noel Ferris and Paul Hannah. Ferris was the handsome young man who had appeared as I was phoning. Hannah was even younger, but not as handsome. He had chubby pink cheeks and not enough nose, and his ears stuck out. A dick had gone for him at the Mushroom Theater, where he had been rehearsing. At the moment Cramer sent for me he and Ferris were discussing the question, when had they last been in the parlor? Ferris said one evening about a month ago, when he had gone in to see if the piano was as bad as Martha said it was, and had found it was worse. Hannah said two weeks ago yesterday, when he had come downstairs to make a phone call and Martha was at the phone talking, and he had stepped into the parlor because he didn't want to stand there and listen.

Before they had got onto that they had argued about the knife. Hannah said he had identified it as one from a kitchen drawer which he had often used, and Ferris said he shouldn't have identified it; he should have merely said it was similar. They had got fairly heated, paying no attention to a city employee who was on a chair by the door, taking it in.

I hadn't been allowed in the parlor, but I had seen the experts come and go, and some of them were still there. My first interview had been with Purley Stebbins, who had arrived in person only ten minutes behind the pair from the prowl car. That had taken place in the kitchen. My second interview had been in the room above the kitchen, Raymond Dell's room as I learned later, with Inspector Cramer and the T-man, Albert Leach. That was an

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honor, but I felt that I rated it because if it hadn't been for me they wouldn't have been there. My phone call to the Secret Service had brought Leach on the jump, and Leach's appearance had brought the Inspector. No doubt about it. So it was Cramer, not Stebbins, that I got to see reacting to outside authority, and it wasn't very instructive because he was mostly reacting to me as usual.

"You say Wolfe told her he would expect no fee and he wasn't interested in a reward, but he sent you here with her and you paid the cab fare. Nuts. I know Wolfe and I know you. You expect me to swallow that?"

Or: "You try to tell me that you don't know exactly how long it was after you found the body until you called Stebbins because you didn't look at your watch when you found the body. That's a lie. The way you've been trained, looking at your watch would have been automatic. Raymond Dell and Martha Kirk say it was just a few minutes after one when you and Hattie Annis left the kitchen. You called Stebbins at one thirty-four. Half an hour. What were you doing?"

Or: "Quit your clowning!"

Of course he was at a disadvantage, since at the beginning he expected to be riled, and when he's riled his mind skips. So I got no bruises, and the one ticklish point was never mentioned. I gave him all the facts about the package from the time Hattie left it with me until I put it in the safe, excepting one detail, and he didn't even hint at the possibility that it might be queer, and neither did Leach. Leach horned in only once, when he got riled too.

"I warned you," he said, "not to try any fancy tricks with the Secret Service. And at that moment, when I was asking you if Hattie Annis had been there, she was in with Wolfe. You have just admitted it. You withheld information required by an agent of the Federal government in the performance of his duty, and you will answer for it."

"I'll answer now," I told him. "Why should I tell you anything about anybody? If you had any proper ground for asking me about Hattie Annis you didn't mention it. Inspector Cramer doesn't have to mention it. She and I found a dead body in her house, and it's his job to catch murderers, and it's possible that there is a connection between the murder and the package that Miss Annis found and brought to Mr. Wolfe. So I answer his questions. I can't think off-

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hand of any question whatever that I owe you an answer to. Do you want to try?"

That was deliberate. Sooner or later someone was going to ask me if I knew that money was counterfeit, and I might as well get it over with and have it on the record. But he merely looked at Cramer, and Cramer resumed.

At twenty minutes to four, when a dick named Callahan entered the kitchen and said the Inspector wanted me, I supposed it had been decided that it was time to try me on the ten-thousand-dollar question, but when I saw Cramer's face I knew that wasn't it. Instead of being set to blurt a tough one at me he was chewing on a cigar, and he does that only when he doesn't like the prospect. Lieutenant Rowcliff and another dick were with him, in Dell's room. Leach wasn't there. It didn't come easy for him. He took the cigar from his mouth, put it back, and rasped, "We need your help, Goodwin."

"I'd love to help," I said.

"Yeah." Not at all the right tone for asking a favor. "Did you tell that Annis woman to bolt herself in?"

"No. I have reported it as it happened."

"Yeah." He removed the cigar. "She won't open the door. She won't open her trap. We don't want to smash the door unless we have to. She's your client and if you tell her to slide that damn bolt she will."

"She is not my client. Nor Mr. Wolfe's."

"So you say. Wouldn't she open the door if you asked her to?"

"Probably."

"Okay. Ask her."

I allowed a grin to show. "Not the way you mean. Not with you at my elbow. I'm willing to try if I'm alone in the hall and the door of this room is shut, and I'll explain the situation to her. She has a personal attitude to cops. A cop shot her father."

"Yeah, fifteen years ago. Hasn't she got any sense?"

"No."

"She might know we'll bust the door if we have to. Will you tell her that?"

"Sure. With conditions as specified. You and yours stay here with the door shut. Rowcliff is slow in the skull but his feet are fast."

"Save the gags," Cramer growled, and stuck the cigar in his mouth. I went, closed the door behind me, walked down the hall,

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rapped on Hattie's door, and called, "It's me. Buster Goodwin. I'm alone. Let me in. I want to ask you something."

Footsteps and then her voice. "Where are they?"

"Still in the house but at a safe distance. I am not a flunky."

The bolt grated and the door opened. I entered, shut the door, and slid the bolt. The blinds were down and the lights were on. She had a magazine in her hand. "You might have brought me something to eat," she said. "I haven't had any lunch. You're no good."

I faced her. "That's the second time you've told me I'm no good," I said. "Let's get that settled. If you really mean it why did you let me in?"

"I thought you had something to eat. When I say you're no good that's just for then, when I say it. I'm hungry."

"Okay. Actually I'm extremely good. If I wasn't, why would I bother to come and tell you to stay away from the door because they're going to bust it in?"

"No, they won't."

"Why won't they?"

"Because they know if they do I'll shoot."

I glanced around. A massive old walnut bed, a big old rolltop desk, dresser, chest of drawers, chairs, pictures of men and women all over the walls, actors from a mile off. "What will you shoot with?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I haven't got a gun, but they don't know it."

I eyed her. "May I have permission to call you Hattie?"

"No. Not until I see what happens."

"Very well, Miss Annis. A cop named Cramer, an inspector, asked me to come and tell you they're going to break in. They can do that without getting in the line of fire, and they will. That's all he asked me to tell you, but I add this on my own, that if they have to smash the door to get to you it's an absolute certainty that they'll take you downtown, and they'll probably hold you as a material witness. They're investigating a murder that occurred in your house, and you're a suspect. Whereas if you let them in and answer the questions they have a right to ask, they probably won't take you downtown and you can sleep in your own bed."

She was staring at me. "You say I'm a suspect?"

"Certainly. When you came home to sew on the button, it could have been then."

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"*You* suspect me?"

"Of course not. Even if I'm no good I'm not a halfwit."

Her lips tightened. "They'll have to carry me."

"They can. There's enough of them, and they have handcuffs."

"They'll need them." She cocked her head. A strand of gray hair fell across her eye, and she didn't bother to brush it back. "All right, Buster. I've never hired a detective. Do you want me to sign something?"

"Whom are you hiring, Miss Annis?"

"I'm hiring you. Call me Hattie."

"You can't hire me. I work for Nero Wolfe on salary."

"Then I'm hiring Nero Wolfe."

"To do what?"

"To show the cops. To make them wish they had never set foot in my house. To make them eat dirt."

"He wouldn't take the job. You might hire him to investigate the murder, and he might fill your order as a by-product. But he has exaggerated ideas about fees, and I doubt if you could afford it."

"Would you help him?"

"Of course. That's my job."

She shut her eyes, tight. In a moment she opened them. "I could pay him one-tenth of all I've got besides the house. I could pay him forty-two thousand dollars. That ought to be enough."

It took a little effort not to gawk. "I should think so," I conceded. "If you want me to put it to him I have to ask a question that he'll ask. He's very realistic about money. What you've got besides the house, is it in something convenient? Would you have to sell something—for instance, a race horse or a yacht?"

"Don't try to be funny, Buster. I'm realistic about money too. It's in tax-exempt bonds in a vault in a bank. Do you want me to sign something?"

"That's not necessary, now that I call you Hattie." I controlled an impulse to reach and brush the strand of hair away from her eye. "You may not be very available the rest of the day, so we'll leave it this way: you have hired Mr. Wolfe to investigate the murder, and if he doesn't take the job I'll notify you as soon as I can get in touch with you. And you'll leave—"

"Why wouldn't he take the job?"

"Because he's a genius and he's eccentric. Geniuses don't have to have reasons. But leave that to me. And if you're going to pay

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us I might as well start earning it. Have you got a stamp pad?"

She said yes, in the desk, and I went and found it in a pigeonhole. She said she had no glossy paper, and I took her magazine and found a page ad in color with wide margins in white, and tore it out. I'll want all ten fingers," I told her. "First your right hand, the thumb. Like this."

She didn't ask why. She didn't ask anything. Either she knew why or she merely wanted to humor me, and your guess is as good as mine. When I had the set, the right hand on the right margin and the left on the left, I folded the sheet with care and put it between the pages of my notebook.

"Okay," I said. "You'll leave the door unbolted, and I'll tell Cramer—"

"No, I won't. If they break in that door they'll pay for it."

I explained again. I told her that anyone as realistic about money as she was ought to be able to be realistic about murder; but she wouldn't budge. I told her she didn't have to invite them in or let them in, just leave the door unbolted, and she said I was no good. So I left, and the second I was across the sill, the door clicked shut and I heard the bolt go in. I walked to the rear and opened the door of Dell's room.

"Well?" Cramer demanded.

"No soap." I stood in the doorway. "If she has a brain I can't imagine what she uses it for. She wants to hire Nero Wolfe to make you eat dirt. I told her if you had to break in you would probably take her downtown and hold her, and she said you'd have to carry her. When I left she pushed the bolt."

"All right," Cramer said, "if that's the way she wants it." He turned to speak to Rowcliff, but I didn't stay to listen, because I had an urgent errand. Callahan, the dick who had brought me from the kitchen, wasn't in sight, and if I went downstairs unescorted I probably wouldn't be stopped. I backed off, made the landing, descended, asked the dick in the lower hall if it was still snowing as I got my hat and coat, took my time putting my coat on, opened the front door, and was gone.

The snow was coming down thicker and was an inch deep on the sidewalk. Outside were two harness bulls, four police cars double parked, and a small group of unofficial criminologists. I headed east, found a phone booth in a bar and grill around the corner on Eighth Avenue, and dialed. It was after four and Wolfe would be up in the plant rooms for his afternoon session with the

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orchids, which is from four to six; so it was Fritz who answered, and I told him to switch it.

"Yes?" Wolfe is always gruff on the phone, but when it interrupts him up there he is even gruffer.

"Me again. From a booth on Eighth Avenue. I left the scene informally because I have something to report. We won't be contradicted about the money. Miss Annis, whom I now call Hattie, has buttoned her lip and will keep it buttoned. She is in her room with the door bolted and Cramer and Rowcliff are going to batter their way in. Stebbins isn't around. I was re—"

"He was here."

"Who? Stebbins?"

"Yes. I spoke with him at the door. He wanted the package of money. I told him it was not mine to surrender, since it had been left in your safekeeping. He said nothing about its being bogus. I didn't admit him. He was not pleased."

"I'll bet. I was requested by Cramer to persuade Hattie to let him in, and I tried—not through the door, she let me in. When I told her that if they had to bust the door to get to her they would take her downtown and hold her, she said she wanted to hire you to make them eat dirt. I said the only job you might take would be to investigate the murder, and dirt-eating, if any, would be a by-product, and your fee would be high. She said she could pay you twenty-one thousand dollars, one-tenth of the tax-exempt bonds she has in a bank vault. I said we would leave it that you are hired, and if you refuse to take it on because you're eccentric I'll notify her. The trouble is, how can I notify her if she's not accessible? Shall I ask Cramer to tell her you're too busy?"

"Yes."

"Naturally," I said sympathetically. "You would rather starve than work if only you had no appetite. The fact is, she wanted to hire me and I told her to get me she had to hire you. I'll hold the wire while you count ten."

"Confound you." It was a growl from the depths. "She may have no bonds. She is probably indigent."

"Not a chance. She's my favorite screwball, but she's not a liar. I'm under her spell and I'm in her debt. She made Cramer ask me a favor."

Silence. Then, more growl. "Come home and report. We'll see."

One of the rules in that house is no business talk at meals,

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ever, and another is no business in the plant rooms except in emergencies. That winter day the emergency was not that some sudden development demanded immediate action or that an important case had reached a crisis; it was that Wolfe had to decide to work or not to work, and he could get no pleasure fiddling with orchids with that hanging over him. He took my report not in one of the three plant rooms, with their dazzle of color, but in the potting room, perched on his made-to-order stool at the big bench Theodore was washing pots at the sink, and I used his stool.

Wolfe keeps his eyes closed when I am reporting and rarely interrupts with questions. When I finished he took in air clear down to his middle, let it out, opened his eyes, and grunted, "Any comments or suggestions?"

"Yes, sir, plenty. First, Hattie Annis is out. She couldn't possibly have been faking it when we went in and found the body. I wouldn't try to predict what she's going to do, but I know what she didn't do. She didn't kill Tammy Baxter. Second, their not asking if I knew the money is counterfeit is an insult to my intelligence and yours too. Leach had told Cramer not to mention it because what he wants is to find the source. He'd rather catch a counterfeiter than a murderer any day, and if counterfeiting was mentioned to me I might mention it to a reporter. Evidently he thinks we can't add two and two. A T-man coming to ask me about a woman who had left a package of bills with me, and the idea that they might be counterfeit wouldn't occur to me?"

"He didn't know she had been here and left a package."

"He did when I was being questioned. He heard me tell Cramer. Cramer must have been biting nails. He'd love to get us for being in possession of a stack of the queer. Ten to one Leach didn't know he sent Stebbins here to get it. Third, Tammy Baxter was a T-woman."

Wolfe made a face. "That mean something?"

"It does now. If there are T-men, there can be a T-woman, though I've never heard of one. This morning Leach asked if she was here, and when I told him she had been and gone he asked if she had been back or phoned and then switched to Hattie Annis. Why didn't he ask what Tammy Baxter had said? Because he knew; she had reported to him. Also he knew the phone number of that house. Also Cramer. Why wasn't he more interested in my talk with Tammy Baxter only an hour or so before she was murdered? Because he already knew about it from Leach."

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"Then she had been posted in that house by the Secret Service?"

"Sure. A good guess is that they knew someone who lived there had passed bad money. I doubt if they knew which one, because if so they know who killed Tammy Baxter, and I don't think they would dare not to tell Cramer—but it's possible. Their big play isn't for the passers, it's for the plant. Fourth, one of the four roomers is it, on account of the knife. It came from that kitchen. Raymond Dell, Noel Ferris, Paul Hannah, Martha Kirk. If one or more of them have been crossed off by alibis that would narrow it. Fifth, if Hattie Annis is your client you probably want to speak to Parker, since you are against leaving a client in the coop. I'll ring him."

"I haven't told you to."

"Do you tell me not to?"

He tightened his lips. He took a deep breath. "Confound you. Call him."

"Right. But first one more. Sixth, I see no reason why I shouldn't try the package for prints, since it hasn't occurred to us that the bills may be phony. I'm assuming that you don't intend to let loose of your client's property unless a court orders you to."

"Certainly not. But there will be other prints than yours. Hers."

"I've got hers."

"You have?"

"Yes, sir. In case."

"So." He got off the stool. "So you make the decisions. Let me know if you wish to confer. Go."

I went. It isn't easy to pass down the aisles of those three rooms without stopping, even in an emergency, but that time I stopped only once, where a group of Miltonia roezlis was sporting more than fifty racemes on four feet of bench. It was the best crop of Miltonias that Wolfe (and Theodore) had ever had. The display is always harder to believe when snow is dancing on the sloping glass overhead.

Since it was after office hours I dialed the home number of Nathaniel Parker, the lawyer, got him, put him through to Wolfe, and listened in, as I am supposed to when not told to get off. He was a little doubtful about springing our client before morning, since they had had to smash a door to get to her and she wasn't talking, but he said he would get on it immediately and do his best. That done, I went to the safe and got the wrapping paper and bills.

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It was a two-hour job, and I took an hour out for dinner, so it was after nine o'clock when I finished. It took so long because (a) wrapping paper is a mean surface to lift prints from, (b) I had to check and double check every print with Hattie's and mine, and (c) I had to be darned careful to leave any evidence intact.

During the last hour, after dinner, Wolfe was there at his desk in the only chair he really likes, reading his current book. Now and then he shot me a glance, of course hoping that I would announce that we had him, and his job would be simple. But at a quarter past nine I swiveled and spoke. "No. Postively. Seven good prints, twelve fair ones, and fourteen smudges. The only ones that can be identified are Hattie's and mine. Either he never handled it without gloves or he wiped it."

I'll say this for him: he never asks silly questions like Are you sure, or Have you tried the bills too. He merely growled. "It was too much to expect." He picked up his bookmark, a thin strip of gold that had been given him by a client in spite of the size of his bill, inserted it, and put the book down. "What do you suggest?"

Ignoring the sarcasm, I took the bills and wrapping paper, still handling them with care, went to the safe, and put them in. "Now," I said, returning, "it will take a brain, and you know where one is. I only run errands. I know you never leave the house on business, but if you—"

The doorbell rang. I offered myself three to one that it was Cramer, probably with Leach for company, stepped to the hall, and flipped the switch for the stoop light. It had been a bad bet. I stepped back in and told Wolfe, "All four of them. Dell, Ferris, Hannah, and Martha Kirk."

He glared at me. "You invited them?"

"No, sir. It's a surprise party. People have no consideration. They might at least have phoned."

"It's impossible! I'm not ready. I haven't prepared my mind." He ran his fingers through his hair. "It's impossible. Bring them in."

I went to the front, opened the door, and invited them to enter. Martha Kirk, first in, did not curtsy, and Raymond Dell didn't bow. When I turned after shutting the door she was sitting on the bench pulling off her galoshes and the men were removing their coats. "Have you written your piece?" Dell demanded.

That had been so long ago, eight whole hours, that for a second I didn't get him. "Oh," I said. "I had forgotten I was doing one. I got interrupted."

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"We want to see Nero Wolfe," Martha Kirk said. "And you."

"Then you might as well have us together. This way." I went to he office door and stood aside, and they filed in. Wolfe arose, inlined his head an eighth of an inch as I pronounced each name, nd sat. He never shakes hands with strangers. I was going to put Martha Kirk in the red leather chair, but Dell beat us to it, so I noved up a yellow one for her, next to me, and Ferris and Hanah moved their own, beyond her. Wolfe's eyes went from left to ight and back again.

"Go ahead, Martha," Paul Hannah said. "This was your idea."

"No," Martha said, "it was Hattie's idea." She was still ornanental, and the dimples were still there, but she didn't look up to naking an omelet of larks' eggs. She turned her face to me and hen to Wolfe. "It's crazy," she said. "The idea that Hattie—it's ust crazy."

"She doesn't mean," Noel Ferris explained, "that Hattie's idea is razy, she means the idea that Hattie killed Tammy Baxter. Hatie's idea was that we should come and see you."

"According to Martha," Paul Hannah said.

"Idiot children," Raymond Dell rumbled. His hat had pressed his white mane down, but it was starting to unfurl. "Snapping nd yapping in the face of tragedy."

"Death isn't tragedy," Ferris said. "Life is tragedy."

"Was it Miss Annis' idea," Wolfe inquired, "that you should ome and expound philosophy to me? Miss Kirk, I gather that she spoke with you?"

Martha nodded. "She spoke *to* me. She said she had hired you nd Mr. Goodwin to make the cops eat dirt, and we must come nd tell you everything we had told the cops."

"When did she hire you?" Hannah demanded. His chubby pink heeks were a little saggy.

Wolfe ignored him and kept his eyes at Martha. "What else did she say?"

"Nothing. She couldn't. I was coming downstairs, and they were carrying her out, and she saw me and said that, and I said we would. Of course I couldn't tell the others then, they were still questioning us, but I did as soon as they left."

"They were carrying her literally? Bodily?"

"Yes. Two men."

"Had they forced the door of her room?"

"Yes."

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Wolfe grunted. "Possibly actionable. For the record, Miss Annis is my client, but my job is not as she defined it. I have engaged to investigate the murder that was committed in her house."

"It wasn't committed by her," Martha declared. "But they've arrested her. It's crazy!"

"It was committed by a sex maniac," Paul Hannah said. "Twice last week a man followed her right to the door. When she told me about it I offered to ambush him, but she said no, if he did it again and came close she would handle him. She would too."

Noel Ferris twisted his lip. "Lochinvar Hannah," he drawled. "These sex maniacs are damn clever. Of course getting in wasn't much—he could have a bag of assorted keys; but getting the knife from the kitchen was a real stroke. We know he did because you identified it."

"You keep harping on that." Hannah's cheeks were pinker. "Certainly I identified it, with that nick in it. I supposed you all would. I knew Hattie would."

"I did," Martha said.

Ferris turned a hand over. "Then I should have too. I was too sentimental, I always am. I had a vague notion that it would be better to leave it plausible that the knife was a stranger. Also I am too sensitive. I couldn't bear the thought that the knife I had sliced ham with had been . . ." He finished it with a gesture, an actor's gesture.

Raymond Dell snorted. "Adolescent imbeciles! All three of you! We came here to serve a friend in whose debt we are, not to prattle. Tammy Baxter was new in that house, not yet of us. For all we know, Hattie may have had reason to fear her beyond endurance. In a frenzy of fear, in the panic of desperation, she killed her. That is quite possible. We know that Hattie was not herself. We thought her incapable of guile, but she brought this man Goodwin, a professional detective—she brought him there and presented him to Martha and me in false colors."

Ferris' brows were up. "But you came here to serve her?"

"I did." Dell's boom would have carried to the gallery if there had been one. "Whether she killed or not, whether she was wise to trust her fate to this man Wolfe and this man Goodwin—we are not to judge. We can only ask, what can we do or say to help her?" His eyes focused on Wolfe. "And we can only ask you."

Martha Kirk put in, "Hattie said we should tell him everything we told the cops."

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Wolfe shook his head. "That may not be necessary. I hope not." He cleared his throat. "It has already been of some slight help to sit and listen to you; that is inherent in the situation. When four people are conversing in my presence and I know that one of them committed murder less than twelve hours ago, I would be a dolt to get no inkling at all. Look at you now—your reaction to what I just said. You are all staring at me. One of you opened his mouth to interrupt, but closed it. None of you glances at the others, or at any other. But I know that one of you is feeling the pinch. He is asking himself, are my eyes all right, how about my mouth, should I say something? He is aware, of course, that it will take more than an inkling to undo him; but an inkling can give me a start."

It wasn't giving me one. They all kept their stares at him. Martha's lips were parted, and Ferris' were twisted. Paul Hannah's jaw was working. Dell's chin was up and he was frowning. Ferris demanded, "You *know* it was one of us? How?"

"Not by an inkling, Mr. Ferris. There is the knife, and there is my conviction, on grounds that satisfy me, that Miss Annis didn't use it. But that isn't all. I prefer not to disclose why she took Mr. Goodwin to her house in masquerade; though one of you has certainly guessed why I'll leave it a guess."

He flattened his palms on the chair arms. "And now we may proceed. Three of you came here to help a friend, and one of you came because he didn't dare to refuse, nor will he dare to refuse to answer my questions; and I expect him to expose himself. If he has already exposed himself to the police we are wasting our time, but I'll proceed on the assumption that he hasn't. If I fail, it will be because I haven't asked the right questions—and I don't intend to fail."

His head turned. "Mr. Dell. Have you paid your room rent for the past three months?"

Raymond Dell's chin lifted another quarter of an inch. "We could all refuse," he said.

Wolfe nodded. "You could indeed. If you think that would serve your friend in whose debt you are. Shall I try the others?"

"No. As for that question, if Hattie is your client you could ask her. Perhaps you already have. I have paid no room rent for three years and she has asked for none."

Wolfe's head moved. "Miss Kirk?"

She was still staring at him. "The cops didn't ask me that."

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Wolfe grunted. "They have their technique and I have mine. That question applies to the problem as I see it. Does it embarrass you?"

"No. I have lived there nearly a year and I have paid five dollars every week."

"From current income?"

"I haven't any current income. I get a check from my father every month."

"I trust it doesn't embarrass him. Mr. Ferris?"

Noel Ferris passed his tongue over his lips. "How this applies is beyond me," he said, "but I don't dare to refuse to answer. I haven't figured how I stand on rent, but you can. I've had a room there for eighteen months. Last summer I was on television for thirteen weeks and I gave Hattie a hundred and fifty dollars. A show I was in flopped in November, and since then it has been television crumbs. Two weeks ago I gave her sixty dollars. You figure it."

"You're a hundred and eighty dollars short. Mr. Hannah?"

Paul Hannah was looking determined. "I'm not taking any dare," he blurted. "You may think your question applies, but I don't. You say you know one of us killed Tammy Baxter, but I don't believe it. I know damn well I didn't. You don't kill someone without a reason, and what was it? She had only been there three weeks and we barely knew her. The knife doesn't prove anything. Whoever killed her got in the house somehow, and if he was in the house he could have got the knife. I'm not taking any dare."

Wolfe shook his head. "Your spunk is impressive, Mr. Hannah, but it bounces off. If you are innocent the question whether you'll take a dare doesn't arise; the question is, what are you here for? To oblige a friend or parade your conceit?"

"I'm here because of what Hattie said to Martha and I wanted to hear what you had to say. And you ask if I've paid my room rent, for God's sake. All right, I have. I've been there four months and I've paid every week. That proves something?"

"Obviously. That you are not a pauper. You have an income?"

"No. I have money that I saved."

"So. That point is covered." Wolfe's eyes went to Martha. "Now, Miss Kirk, for what you have told the police—at least one detail. Your movements this morning, say from ten thirty until one o'clock. Where were you?"

"I was in my room," she said, "until about a quarter after

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twelve. The police wanted to know exactly, but I couldn't tell them. I got in late last night, and I always do exercises for an hour when I get up. About a quarter after twelve I went down to the kitchen. There were no oranges and I went out and got some. I wasn't gone more than ten minutes. I was cooking bacon and eggs when Mr. Dell came in, and Hattie with Mr. Goodwin, and Hattie said he was going to do a piece for a magazine, and—"

"That's far enough. Which room is yours?"

"The third floor front, above Hattie's."

"And the others? Their rooms?"

"Ray's is the second floor rear—Raymond Dell's. The rear room on my floor, the third, is Tammy Baxter's. The one above mine, on the fourth floor, is Noel Ferris's, and the rear one on that floor is Paul Hannah's."

"Did you see any of them this morning?"

"No. Not until Ray came to the kitchen this afternoon."

"Did you hear any of them moving or speaking?"

"No."

"Not even Mr. Ferris in the room above you?"

"No. I suppose he was up and gone before I woke up."

"Did you hear or see anything at all that might be of significance?"

She shook her head. "The police thought I must have, when I was in the kitchen, but I didn't."

Wolfe's head went left, to Raymond Dell in the red leather chair. "Mr. Dell. I know you came downstairs when Miss Annis entered the house with Mr. Goodwin shortly before one o'clock. Before that?"

"Nothing," Dell rumbled.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. That was when I left my room for the first time. Until then I had seen no one, heard nothing, and seen nothing. I had been asleep."

"Then how did you know there were no oranges?"

Dell's chin jerked up. "What's that? Oh." He gestured. "That man Goodwin. I knew because there had been none when I went down for some in the early hours—the late hours. I don't sleep at night; I read. I was reading Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and when I finished it, at five o'clock perhaps, or six, I wanted oranges. I always do around that hour. Finding none, I returned to my room and finally dozed."

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"So that was customary? You rarely stir before twelve?"

"I never do."

"And at night you read. How do you spend your afternoons?"

Dell frowned. "Could that conceivably apply?"

"Yes. Conceivably."

"I want to be present when you apply it. That would be a revelation worthy of the Cumaean sybil. I baby-sit."

"You what?"

"The current abhorrent term is 'baby-sit.' I have a friend who is a painter, by name Max Eder, who lives in an East Side tenement. His wife is dead. He has a son and daughter aged three and four, and five days a week I am their keeper for five hours, from two till seven. For a stipend. Mondays and Tuesdays I am free to roam the market if I am so inclined. You frown. To offer my talents in television dens. I am so inclined only by necessity."

"What is Mr. Eder's address?"

Dell shrugged, an actor's shrug. "This approaches lunacy. However, it's in the phone book. Three-fourteen Mission Street."

"How long have you been—uh—performing this service for him?"

"Something over a year."

Wolfe left him. "Mr. Hannah. Since I am now merely asking for what you have already told the police, your whereabouts today from ten thirty to one, I hope you won't be provoked."

"You do like hell," Hannah blurted. "Parading my conceit, huh? I'm sticking only because I told Martha I would. I left the house a little after nine o'clock and spent a couple of hours around the West Side docks, and then I took a bus downtown and got to the Mushroom Theater a little before twelve. We start rehearsal at noon. Around two o'clock a man came and flashed a badge and said I was wanted for questioning and took me to Forty-seventh Street."

"What were you doing around the docks?"

"I was looking and listening. In the play we're doing, *Do As Thou Wilt,* I'm a longshoreman, and I want to get it right."

"Where is the Mushroom Theater?"

"Bowie Street. Near Houston Street."

"Do you have a leading role in the play?"

"No. Not leading."

"How many lines have you?"

"Not many. It's not a big part. I'm young and I'm learning."

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"How long have you been rehearsing?"

"About a month."

"Have you appeared at that theater before?"

"Once, last fall. I had a walk-on in *The Pleasure Is Mine*."

"How long did it run?"

"Six weeks. Pretty good for off-Broadway."

"Do you favor any particular spot when you visit the docks?"

"No. I just move around and look and listen."

"Do you do that every day?"

"Hell, no."

"How many times in the past month?"

"Only once before today. A couple of times when I got the part, in November."

I was thinking that at least he had one of the basic qualifications for an actor. He was ready and willing to answer any and all questions about his career, with or without a dare, whether they applied or not. If Wolfe thought it would help to have the plot of *Do As Thou Wilt* described in detail, all he had to do was ask.

But apparently he didn't need it. His head moved. "And you, Mr. Ferris?"

"I'm feeling a lot better," Noel Ferris said. "When the questions they asked made me realize that I was actually suspected of murder, and I also realized that I had no alibi, it looked pretty dark. Believe me. What if the others had all been somewhere else and could prove it? So I thank you, Mr. Wolfe. I feel a lot better. As for me, I left the house a little after ten and called at four agencies. Two of them would remember I was there, but probably not the exact time. When I got hungry I went back to the house to eat. I can't afford five-dollar lunches, and I can't eat eight-cent ones. When I entered the house a man was at the phone telling someone that Tammy Baxter had been murdered and her body was in the parlor."

"What kind of agencies?"

"Casting. Theater and television."

"Do you visit them daily?"

"No. About twice a week."

"And the other five days? How do you pass the time?"

"I don't. It passes me. Two days, sometimes three, I make horses and kangaroos and other animals. I go to a workroom and model them and make molds. Something on the order of Cellini. I

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get eight dollars for a squirrel. Twenty for a giraffe."

"Where is the workroom?"

"In the rear of a shop on First Avenue. The name of the shop is Harry's Zoo. The name of the owner is Harry Arkazy. He has a sixteen-year old daughter as beautiful as a rosy dawn, but she lisps. Her name is Ilonka. His son's name—"

"This is not a comedy, Mr. Ferris," Wolfe snapped. He twisted his neck to look at the wall clock. "I engaged to act for Miss Annis only five hours ago and I haven't arranged my mind, so my questions may be at random, but they are not frivolous." His eyes moved to take them in. "Now that I have seen you and heard you I am better prepared, and I can consider how to proceed. I will leave it to Miss Annis to thank you—three of you—for coming." He arose. "I expect to see you again."

Martha was gawking at him. "But Hattie said to tell you everything we told the cops!"

He nodded. "I know. It would take all night. I'll go to that extreme only by compulsion; and if you told them anything indicative they are hours ahead of me and I would only breathe their dust."

Dell boomed. "You call this investigating a murder? Asking me if I had paid my room rent and how I spend my afternoons?"

It *was* a little odd, the four suspects coming uninvited to empty the bag and being told to go almost before they got started. Noel Ferris, his lip twisted, got up and headed for the hall. Martha Kirk, getting no satisfaction from Wolfe, appealed to me: didn't I realize that Hattie had been arrested for a murder she didn't commit? Paul Hannah sat and listened to us, chewing his lip, then got up and touched her arm and said they might as well go. Raymond Dell stood, lowered his chin, gazed at Wolfe half a minute, registering indignation, wheeled, and marched out. (Exit Dell, center.)

I followed Martha and Hannah to the hall, but she preferred to put on her galoshes herself. When I opened the door for them a few snowflakes danced in.

Back in the office, Wolfe was sitting again, leaning back with his eyes closed. I asked if he wanted beer, got a nod, and went to the kitchen and brought a bottle and glass, and a glass of milk for me. He opened his eyes, took in a bushel of air through his nose and let it out through his mouth, straightened up, picked up the bottle and poured.

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He spoke. "Saul and Fred and Orrie. At eight in the morning in ıy room."

My brows went up. Saul Panzer is the best operative south of he North Pole. His rate is ten dollars an hour and he is worth wenty. Fred Durkin's rate is seven dollars and he is worth even-fifty. Orrie Cather's rate is also seven dollars and he is ⁄orth six-fifty.

"Oh." I took a sip of milk. "Then you did get an inkling?"

"I got a conclusion: that it would be futile to go on pecking at hem. Mr. Leach has been on their flanks for three weeks, and ıow Mr. Cramer's army has them under siege. My only chance of ıriority is to surprise him from the rear."

The foam was down to the rim of his glass, and he lifted it and lrank, a healthy gulp. "It's a forlorn chance, certainly, but it's vorth trying for want of a better. I am not familiar with the pro-edures of counterfeiters, but it seems unlikely that an underling vould be entrusted with five hundred twenty-dollar bills. Ten housand dollars. We know he had that large supply; and that ıermits the conjecture that his connection may be not with a nere go-between, but with the source. If so, the quickest way to ettle it would be to locate the source."

"Yeah. It's barely possible that Leach has had that idea."

"No doubt. I assume that when Miss Baxter took a room in that ıouse her primary mission was to search the premises for coun-erfeiting equipment. Obviously she found none. I also assume hat, as you suggested, it was known that one of the inhabitants f that house had passed counterfeit money, but it was not known vhich one, and they were all under surveillance—by Miss Baxter n the house and by others outside. And if I were a Secret Service ıgent assigned to keep an eye on Raymond Dell I would suppose hat any meeting he had with a supplier of contraband would be landestine. That is how my mind would work. The first day I fol-owed him to an East Side tenement I would of course make in-[uiries, with due caution, but when he went there five days a veek and I learned from Miss Baxter what he did there, my at-ention would be diverted.

"But I am not a Secret Service agent. My attention is drawn to hat tenement house, and specifically to Max Eder, a painter. An ırtist. I shall send Orrie Cather there tomorrow morning to re-:onnoiter. Fred Durkin will go to the shop on First Avenue—by he way, I want its address. Harry's Zoo." He made a face, "Saul

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Panzer will go to the Mushroom Theater. As I said, it's a forlor chance, but what better can we do with tomorrow? Unless yo have a suggestion?"

"I have," I said emphatically. "I respectfully suggest that yo start thinking up something for day after tomorrow."

He grunted. He picked up his glass, took a gulp of beer, swal lowed it, licked his lips, and put the glass down. "'Forlorn' wa too strong a word," he said. "I have an expectation that is no wholly unreasonable. Twelve hours of the time of those three me plus expenses comes to more than three hundred dollars. I don' hazard that amount, even of a client's money, on a pig in a poke."

"Then you did get an inkling."

"Certainly."

"Fine. I hope it's not counterfeit." I swiveled and got the phon and dialed Saul Panzer's number.

I was there at the beginning of the briefing session in Wolfe's bedroom at eight o'clock Tuesday morning, but when the phon interrupted us a second time, Wolfe told me to go down to the of fice and take it there. The first time it was a *Times* reporte wanting to speak with Wolfe, and when I told him Wolfe wa busy and would I do, he said no and hung up. The second call which I took in the office, was from Lon Cohen of the *Gazette,* wh preferred me to Wolfe any day. He wanted to know when he coul send a photographer to take a picture of the dirt that Wolfe wa going to feed the cops. Evidently one of the two who had carried Hattie out knew a newspaperman. Lon had other questions, natu rally, but I told him the answers would have to wait until I foun out what they were.

I was considering whether to rejoin the briefing session when the phone rang again. It was Nathaniel Parker. He was sorry he hadn't been able to spring our client, but it had taken him three hours to find out where she was, and he hadn't got to see her until midnight. He expected to have her out by noon.

At nine o'clock the trio came down. One of the reasons they are better than most is that none of them looks it. Saul Panzer, un dersized and wiry, with a big nose, could be a hackie. Fred Dur kin, broad and burly and bald, could be a piano mover. Orrie Cather, tall and trim and dressy, could be an automobile sales man. They stepped into the office, and Saul said they had been told to take $300 apiece in used bills. I said as I went to open the

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safe that even with inflation and even with janitors promoted to building superintendents, fifty bucks was the top price for one, and they would please return the change. Orrie said that if they had to buy clerks and elevator men and neighbors there wouldn't be any change. Saul said they would each give me a ring every couple of hours or so.

When they had gone I went on with the morning chores—opening the mail, dusting the desks, filing the cards of propagation and performance records which Theodore puts on my desk every evening. That was just for my hands and eyes; my mind was busy with something else. Of all the things I do to earn my pay, from sharpening pencils to jumping a visitor before he can get his gun up, the most important is riding Wolfe, and he knows it. Sometimes it's next to impossible to tell whether he's working or only pretending to. That was the question that morning. If he was only stalling, if he had sent for Saul and Fred and Orrie just to keep from starting his brain going, the thing for me to do was to go up to the plant rooms and go to work on him. It was the same old problem, and the trouble was that I would have nothing to say when he narrowed his eyes at me, as he would, and inquired coldly, "What would you suggest?"

That was what my mind was on, and was still on when the doorbell rang a little after ten o'clock and I went to the hall for a look. It was Albert Leach, with his snap-brim hat down even closer to his ears than yesterday. I went and opened the door.

"Good morning," he said, and slipped his hand inside his overcoat.

I supposed he was producing his credentials. "Don't bother," I said, "I recognize you."

But it wasn't credentials. His hand came out with a folded paper. Extending it, he said, "Order of the Federal District Court."

I took it, unfolded it, and read it through. "You know," I said, "this is a new experience. I can't remember that we have ever been served with an order from a Federal court. Mr. Wolfe will be glad to add it to his collection." I stuck it in my pocket.

"You note," he said, "that I am empowered to search for the object specified if necessary."

"You won't have to. You heard me tell Cramer yesterday that I put it in the safe, and it's still there. Come in." I gave him room.

He had excellent manners. He entered, removed his hat, stood while I shut the door, and followed me to the office. I swung the

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safe door open, got a corner of the wrapping paper with my thumb and forefinger, carried it dangling, put it on my desk, and went back and brought the lettuce and the string. "There you are," I said. "I didn't rewrap it after I lifted the prints."

His lips tightened. "You said nothing to Inspector Cramer about lifting prints."

"No? I thought I had. Of course that was routine after Miss Annis told us how and where she found it. You won't find any except hers and mine. I couldn't, and I was pretty thorough."

"You tampered with evidence."

"What was it evidence of—then?" My feelings were hurt. "Anyway, the prints are still there. I'll give you a bag to carry it in, but first we'll have to count it and I want a receipt. It's still the property of Miss Hattie Annis."

He opened his mouth and closed it again. It was a situation. He knew that I knew that he knew that I knew it was counterfeit, and therefore we both knew that Hattie would never see it again, but he was still keeping it off the record. "I'll make a concession," I offered. "We'll weigh it on the postal scale. Put it on."

He picked it up and put it on the scale, and we looked. Just under seventeen ounces. I brought a shopping bag from the kitchen and gave it to him, got at the typewriter, and tapped out a receipt for 16-11/12 oz. of twenty-dollar bills. I was tempted to add "in good condition," but remembered that he had warned me not to try any fancy tricks with the Secret Service. As I handed him the receipt and my pen the doorbell rang, and I stepped to the hall.

It was Inspector Cramer. I went and opened the door. He entered. I shut the door. When I turned, his hand was emerging from inside his coat with a folded paper. He handed it to me. I read it through. It wouldn't be worth keeping as a souvenir—from the State of New York.

"You'll notice," he said, "that I can search for it if I have to."

"You won't have to. You know where it is."

He strode to the office door and on in. I stopped on the sill. Leach, at my desk, with the shopping bag in one hand and the bills in the other, turned.

"It's a problem," I said. "Leach has signed a receipt for it, but I can tear it up. Why don't you split it half and half?"

Cramer stood at arm's length from the T-man. A muscle in the side of his neck was twitching. "That's evidence in a murder

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case," he said. "I have a court order for it."

"So have I," Leach said. "From a Federal court." He put the bills in the bag, taking his time, and tucked the bag under his arm. "If you'll send a man to our office he'll be allowed to examine it, Inspector. We are always ready to cooperate with the local authorities."

He moved, detouring around Cramer. Cramer wheeled and followed him, and I stepped aside to let them by. As Cramer passed he gave me a glare that would have withered a lesser man. I didn't cooperate by going to open the door because I wasn't sure I could keep my face straight, and when they were out and the door had closed I quit trying. A whoop had wanted out the second Cramer produced the paper, and now I let it come. I laughed so loud and so long that Fritz appeared at the kitchen door to ask what had happened.

There was no point in disturbing Wolfe in the plant rooms, so I let it wait until he came down at eleven o'clock. He never whoops, but when I reported and showed him the court orders he allowed himself an all-out chuckle and there was a twinkle in his eye. He said it was just as well he hadn't been present, since Cramer would probably have accused him of staging it, and I agreed. I said I was glad the stuff was out of the house, and he agreed.

Calls came from Saul and Fred and Orrie during the next half-hour. Nothing promising. Orrie had spoken with Max Eder, the janitor of the building, and three other tenants. Fred had bought a squirrel and a kangaroo and had spent an hour in the workroom in the rear of the shop. Saul hadn't been inside the building that contained the Mushroom Theater. From the outside it looked as if it might collapse if you leaned against it. He had spent the two hours covering the neighborhood.

When I relayed the reports to Wolfe, who was doing a crossword puzzle in the *London Observer*, all I got was a grunt. I had about decided that it was time to go to work on him when the doorbell rang and I went to answer it.

It was our lawyer and our client. I hadn't told him to bring her. I was in no mood for her, and Wolfe certainly wasn't. All I could tell her was that Wolfe either had an inkling or hadn't, and he was spending her money at the rate of fifty bucks an hour. I went and opened the door but occupied the threshold.

"Greetings," I said heartily. "This is a relief! I'm sorry we couldn't make it sooner, Hattie, but Mr. Parker did his best.

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You'll take her home, Nat? I'm tied up here."

"Don't call me Hattie," she said, "until I find what you're up to."

"I brought her here," Parker said, "because she insisted." He looked harassed. "I'll be going. I've canceled two appointments and I'm late for another one." He went.

"Every time I come here," Hattie said, "there you stand. What good does it do to open the door if you fill it up?"

I stood aside and she entered. She took off the gray woolen gloves and stuck them in her coat pocket, and unbuttoned her coat. I certainly would have been no good if I hadn't helped her off with the coat, so I did, and put it on a hanger. By the time I had it on the rack she was at the office door, entering, and by the time I got to the office she was in the red leather chair and Wolfe was glowering at her.

"About that lawyer," she said. "I'm not going to pay him too, and I told him so. When I told Buster I could pay forty-two thousand dollars that includes everything."

Wolfe looked at me. I nodded. "All right. I told you I was under a spell. I scaled it down."

He looked at her. "Very well, madam, I'll pay the lawyer. You came to tell me that?"

"I told you before not to madam me. First I want to see that counterfeit money, then I'll know I can trust you. Show it to me."

Wolfe looked at me. I have seen him handle many a crisis, but that was too tough for him. "Archie?" he said.

I opened my desk drawer, took out three sheets of paper, and went and handed her one of them. "A cop named Cramer brought that," I said. "Signed by a judge, ordering us to give him the bills and the wrapper. Cramer knows Mr. Wolfe and me and doesn't like us. When he handed me that he sneered."

"I thought so. You're no good. So you—"

"Wait a minute. We had been afraid that would happen. The cop was too late." I handed her another paper. "A man had already come with that, signed by a Federal judge, and I had turned the money over to him, so the cop was out of luck. I don't say we had arranged it, but facts are facts. The cop was so sore he marched out without a word." I handed her the third paper. "That's the receipt the man signed."

She hadn't even glanced at any of the documents. She handed them back. "I wish I had been here," she said.

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"So do I, Miss Annis. You would have enjoyed it."

"Call me Hattie."

"With pleasure." I returned the papers to the drawer and sat. "Did you have a hard night?"

"Not too hard. There was a couch and I got some naps, but the woman that stayed with me wouldn't turn the lights out, and every two hours they came back and started in again. Cops are too mean to live, and they're too dumb. They might have known I wouldn't speak to a cop."

"Didn't you speak at all?"

"No. Didn't I say I wouldn't?"

"Not a word?"

"No. The worst part was I was hungry. They brought some stuff twice last night and again this morning, but of course I wouldn't touch it. I don't know what kind of drug they had in it, something to make me talk."

"You haven't eaten at all?"

"Of course not."

Wolfe grunted. "That's ridiculous. We have a spare room that is comfortable. Mr. Goodwin will take you to it, and my chef will take you a tray. After your fast you should eat with caution. Have you a preference?"

She cocked her head. "You bet I have, Falstaff. Let the lady enjoy herself. I know about your chef. How about some lamb kidneys *bourguignonne?*"

Wolfe doesn't flabbergast easy, but that did it. "That would take time, mad—Miss Annis. At least two hours."

"I don't mind, I'll take a nap. Is there a bathroom?"

"Certainly."

"Then I can wash the smell of the cops off. But the other thing I want to know, what about the reward? We want that reward."

"That's problematical. I'll keep it in mind. We have a more urgent matter to deal with. After you are refreshed—"

"What matter?"

"The job you hired me for. Investigation of the murder committed in your house."

"I hired you to make the cops eat dirt, and you already have. The one named Cramer, is he a big one with a big red face and little blue eyes like a pig?"

"Pigs' eyes are not blue. Otherwise the description fits."

"Then you've already made him eat dirt. I wish I had been here.

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He was the first one in my room when they busted the door. That's part of your job, to make them pay for that door. The murder, that's their job. I'm surprised it was Tammy Baxter because I thought a counterfeiter would have more clothes, but of course when somebody came for the package and it wasn't there he thought she had taken it and he killed her, but she should have known I had it because I told her yesterday morning—"

The phone rang and I swiveled and got it. A female said that Mr. Mandel wanted to speak to me, and after a wait he came on.

"Goodwin? Mandel of the District Attorney's office. I want to see you. How soon can you be here?"

"Twenty minutes. If necessary."

"It's necessary. It's ten minutes past twelve. I'll expect you at twelve thirty. Right?"

I told him yes, traffic permitting, hung up, and arose. "The D.A.'s office," I announced. "I'm surprised it didn't come sooner. You don't need me anyway, you understand each other so well."

I left them.

They kept me at 155 Leonard Street five and a half hours. All I got out of it was two corned beef sandwiches, a piece of blueberry pie, and two glasses of milk, on the house, eaten at the desk of Assistant D.A. Mandel. What they got out of it was doubtful. In addition to Mandel, I had conversations with another Assistant D.A. named Lindstrom, two detectives attached to the D.A.'s office, and District Attorney Macklin himself.

Over the years I have been suspected of a lot of things by various authorities, from corrupting a cop by buying him a drink to complicity in a murder, and that day they added a new one to the list. None of them came right out with it, but what was really biting them was their suspicion that I was in collusion with the United States government.

Of course they covered other aspects of the case, all of them and thoroughly, but what they concentrated on was the package of phony lettuce. That was all the D.A. himself asked me about, and he put it to me point-blank: did I know the money was counterfeit? I told him point-blank no, and felt better; it's always a relief to get a lie off your chest. He said of course I was lying, that I would have been a nitwit not to suspect it. I said it didn't matter now anyway, since the Secret Service had it, and he blew his top.

I admit it's hard to believe that he actually thought I had dis-

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posed of evidence in a murder case by arranging for Leach to beat Cramer to it, but I suppose a D.A. has as much right to be a damfool as the people who voted for him.

It was a quarter past six when I left the building and flagged a taxi. By the time it turned into 35th Street I had decided that I wouldn't wait until after dinner to go for Wolfe. He was too darned lazy to live. Since, thanks to me, Hattie had told him that he had already made Cramer eat dirt, he would consider that no matter what happened or didn't happen he could send her a bill for a modest hunk of the forty-two thousand, say five grand, and why should he strain his brain? She was out on bail as a material witness and in no real danger. We had got rid of the contraband. There was no great hurry. Nuts, I decided. He had to be poked. As I mounted the stoop and put my key in the door I was choosing my opening remark from three I had hatched.

But I didn't get to use it. The rack in the hall was so crowded with coats that I had to squeeze mine between two that I recognized—Inspector Cramer's and Saul Panzer's. Cramer's voice was raised in the office, and it was hoarse, as it always was when he was in a huff. As I reached the office door he was saying, "—not just to hear you spout! If you've got something let's have it!"

Wolfe, seated behind his desk with his fingers laced at the summit of his middle mound, had sent his eyes to me. "Ah," he said. "Satisfactory. I was concerned."

Sure he was. The bigger the audience the better when he is staging a scene. Before I headed for my desk I glanced around: Cramer in the red leather chair, Sergeant Stebbins at his right; Paul Hannah and Noel Ferris on chairs facing Wolfe's desk; Raymond Dell and Albert Leach, the T-man, behind them; and Martha Kirk and Hattie Annis on the couch to the left of my desk. Saul Panzer was over by the big globe. As I circled around Leach and Dell, Wolfe was speaking.

"You know quite well I have something, Mr. Cramer, or you wouldn't have come. As I told you on the phone I had a stroke of luck, but I had invited it; and I knew where to send the invitation. True, I sent it to three addresses—an East Side tenement, a shop on First Avenue, and a building on Bowie Street which housed the theater—but my expectation was centered on the last place.

"When my expectation was realized I was faced with the ques-

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tion whether to notify you or to notify Mr. Leach; and preferring not to choose, I asked you both to come and to bring Miss Kirk, Mr. Dell, Mr. Ferris, and Mr. Hannah. Miss Annis, my client, was here. I thought the first three had a right to be present; as for Mr. Hannah, since he is both a counterfeiter and a murderer, you and Mr. Leach will—"

"That's a lie," Hannah said, and was rising, but Leach, behind him, grabbed his arm. Hannah jerked, but Leach held on. "Who the hell are you?" Hannah demanded, and with his free hand Leach got his leather fold from his pocket and flipped it open, and by then Stebbins was there.

"Are you arresting him?" Stebbins asked.

"No, are you?" Leach asked.

"Nobody's arresting me," Hannah said.

"Sit down, Hannah," Cramer growled. He looked at Wolfe. He had seen Wolfe perform before, and Leach hadn't. Not only had he heard Wolfe say that Hannah was a counterfeiter and a murderer, but also he saw the expression on Wolfe's face, and he certainly knew that face. He left his chair, put his hand on Hannah's shoulder, and said, "You're under arrest as a material witness in the murder of Tamaris Baxter. All right, Sergeant," and returned to his chair. Stebbins stood at Hannah's left and Leach stood at his right.

"That's prudent, Mr. Cramer," Wolfe said, "since I have no conclusive evidence. Up to three hours ago I had merely a surmise. Talking with these people last evening, I got nothing but faint intimations. Miss Kirk? Unlikely. She attended a ballet school regularly, she exercised an hour every morning, and she received a monthly remittance from her father, all of which could be checked. Mr. Dell? Also unlikely. He had paid no room rent for three years. Mr. Ferris? Possibly, but with a reservation. His statement that two of the agencies he called at yesterday would corroborate him made it improbable that he had followed Miss Annis here yesterday morning."

"So what?" Cramer rasped.

"So my attention centered on Mr. Hannah. He had lived there only four months. He had paid for his room every week. He had almost certainly lied when he said Miss Baxter had told him that a man had twice followed her to the door. Miss Baxter was an agent of the Secret Service of the Treasury Department, and she—"

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"Who said so?" Leach demanded.

"No one. Mr. Goodwin inferred it. You have carried discretion to an extreme, Mr. Leach, in concealing the interest of your organization in the occupants of that house, but you will soon agree that it is no longer needed. So I did not believe Miss Baxter had told Mr. Hannah that. Finally, Mr. Hannah's account of his movements yesterday left him completely free up to noon. He could have followed Miss Annis here and, when she left without entering, back to her house. He could have stolen a parked car and, when she left her house a second time, tried to run it over her, but since he failed, that is of little consequence."

"There's damn little consequence in anything you've said," Cramer growled.

Wolfe nodded. "I'm only explaining why my attention centered on Mr. Hannah. I could indulge in speculation—for instance, why did he kill Miss Baxter there and then? Had she seen him try to kill Miss Annis with the car, and confronted him when he returned to the house? But you can speculate as well as I can, Cramer, and it will be your job, not mine, to screw a confession out of him."

"I've got nothing to confess," Hannah said. "You're going to regret this. You're going to regret it good."

"I think not, Mr. Hannah." Wolfe's eyes went to Leach, standing, and then to Cramer, sitting. "So when I sent three men to those addresses, with the invitations to luck, I sent Saul Panzer to the Mushroom. Mr. Panzer leaves less to luck than any man I know. He phoned four times to report progress. The third time, around three o'clock, he asked for reinforcements and I sent them. The fourth time, less than two hours ago, I told him to come and I phoned you gentlemen. Saul, will you be good enough to describe the situation?"

Since Saul was over by the big globe, all but Wolfe and Stebbins and me had to twist their necks. "Just the situation?" Saul asked.

"Lead up to it briefly."

"Yes, sir. The first two hours I covered the neighborhood, but got no lead, so I went inside the building. I didn't tell the superintendent what I was after, just that I wanted to look around for something, and the way he reacted and the way he accepted forty dollars for his trouble, I decided he was honest. He showed me around the theater and the basement and the second floor. The

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third floor is occupied by a job-printing shop with two presses and the other equipment you would expect. He told the two men there what I had suggested, that I was an insurance underwriters' inspector looking for violations.

"From the way the men looked I decided I was hot, and I told the superintendent I would have to give the shop a good look and it would take a while, and he left. When I started looking behind things on shelves they jumped me and I had to get rough and pull my gun. I didn't shoot, but I had to knock one of them out. There was a phone on a table, and I rang you and asked you to send Fred and Orrie to help me search the place. You said they would be calling in soon, and you would—"

"That's far enough," Wolfe said. "And now?"

"They're still there. In behind stacks of paper on one of the shelves there are eight stacks of new twenty-dollar bills. In a compartment in the back of a cupboard are four engraver's plates that were probably used to make the bills. The two men are on the floor with their hands and feet tied. I don't know their names. There's only one chair in the room and Fred Durkin is sitting on it, or he was when I left, and Orrie Cather was sitting on a pile of paper. One of the men has a lump on the side of his head where I hit him with my gun, but he's not hurt much. I gave the superintendent another twenty dollars. That's the situation."

Paul Hannah had started to rise, but hands on his shoulders had stopped him—Stebbins on the left and Leach on the right of him.

"You might add one detail," Wolfe told Saul. "The name one of them mentioned."

"Yes, sir. That was after Fred and Orrie came and we had them tied and we found the plates. One of them said to the other one, 'I told you Paul would squeal. I told you we ought to clear out.' Do you want the rest of it?"

"That will do for now. You will of course report in full to Mr. Cramer and Mr. Leach." Wolfe's head moved. "As you see, gentlemen, I was faced with a dilemma, since he was both a counterfeiter and a murderer. Preferring not to choose, I asked you both to come, and I leave the question of priority to you. Since Mr. Cramer has him under arrest—"

The movement that interrupted him was by Paul Hannah, but it wasn't much of a movement. Apparently his idea was to lunge at Wolfe, but Stebbins and Leach had him pinned. They glared at

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each other and Hannah glared at Wolfe, and Hattie Annis' voice came from the couch.

"You see, Falstaff? Didn't I tell you?"

She had told him absolutely nothing.

One day three weeks later Wolfe and I were in the office disagreeing about something when the doorbell rang. It was Hattie. I escorted her in, and she sat in the red leather chair, opened her handbag, and took out a little package wrapped in brown paper. Wolfe made a face. I thought, Good Lord, she's found another one. But she reached into the bag again and came out with an envelope that I recognized.

"This check you sent me," she said. "You say in your letter it's for my share of the reward, a hundred dollars. So you kept your share?"

"Yes," Wolfe lied.

"Did you get yours, Buster?"

"Yes," I lied.

"Then that's all right. But what about this bill? Five thousand dollars' fee for services and $621.65 for expenses. What did I tell you that day, Buster? Didn't I say I could pay forty-two thousand dollars?"

"You did."

"Then here it is." She tossed the package onto Wolfe's desk. "A man at the bank helped me pick those bonds and he says there's none better. These are transferred to you. This is the first time I ever let any of them go, and I hope it's the last, but it was worth it. That was a day—the best day I've had since my father died. I didn't like it when I saw in the paper that he had confessed, but that wasn't your fault. I've got no use for anybody that confesses anything to the cops.

"That Paul Hannah was no good. He even told them how he stole the car and tried to kill me with it because he thought I had the package and knew who put it in my parlor, and he saw Tammy across the street and knew she saw him, and when he went back to the house she was at the phone dialing a number and he got the knife from the kitchen, and when he got near her and she stood up he stabbed her, and then he carried her in the parlor and left her there with her skirt up to her waist. He was no good. I'll have to be more careful about people that want a room."

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Wolfe was frowning. "I can't accept those bonds, mad—Miss Annis. Not all of them. I prefer to evaluate my services myself. I did so and sent you a bill."

She nodded. "I tore it up. The day I told Buster that, that settled it. I hired you and I said what I could pay. Now you say you won't accept it. That's no way to do."

Wolfe looked at me. I grinned. He pushed his chair back and arose. "I have a matter to attend to," he said. "I'll leave you with Mr. Goodwin. You understand each other." He marched out.

It took me half an hour to talk her around, and she told me twice not to call her Hattie.

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Christianna Brand

Such a Nice Man

The circumstances in Christianna Brand's story are not at all extraordinary—it might even be true that they are not at all unusual—not these days. They could happen almost anywhere—in a big-city apartment house, in a suburban home. There are telephones almost everywhere these days. But, as the man in the story says: "remote houses, hidden-away places" are the most likely—especially when the woman is alone . . .

What a fool she'd been ever to have let him in! Why must she be always so trusting?—so stupefied by her own too-ready social instinct, never giving herself time to think. "At thirty years of age," her husband used to say to her, "surely you might have developed some common sense." And hadn't there been warning enough? Suppose this were the man who—

But it couldn't be. Such a *nice* man! So nice, he'd seemed, standing out there on the doorstep, so quiet and solid-looking; middle-aged, respectable, and behind him in the semi-darkness, the middle-aged, respectable-looking car. On an impulse, he'd said—just passing—so many happy holidays in this old house when he'd lived here as a boy.

"I ought not to trouble you." He glanced round him. "I hope the gentleman's in, is he? If not I won't bother you. It wouldn't be right—I'll go away." But he didn't come to that till he was well into the hall with the front door closed behind him.

Of course she should have pretended to call to her husband upstairs, or said that he was just bringing in some coal. But no! "Well, he's not in yet, actually. But he'll—he'll be back any minute."

And helpless in the toils of her own convent-bred good manners she led the way into the huge old farmhouse kitchen which to them was the center of the house—moving away from him, backing away to the Welsh dresser at the far end, leaving him standing uncertainly in the doorway. "This room you'll remember,

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I expect? And the grandfather clock?" She felt that she sounded like a renting agent, nervously showing him around.

"Not too sure about the clock," he said—cagily? "I'd have been only a little lad the last time I was here."

"But the dresser—you remember this old dresser? They say it's been there since the house was built." In fact, they had brought it with them two years ago.

If he knew it was a test, that no longer disturbed him. He seemed to abandon himself to discovery. "Oh, well, yes—the dresser I remember," he said.

So now she knew. Her heart lurched, and a sick terror seemed to rise in her throat, almost choking her. She faltered, "I think I can hear the car. My husband's due back any minute, any second. He never leaves me here alone after dark." And she blurted it out, "There's a man—he rings me up." She felt his eyes fixed on her, direct, appraising. "He says filthy things, obscene things."

He stood very quiet, then said at last, "So you've rumbled it already. Well, yes, you're right, it was me. Only, about your husband—that's not true, is it? He won't be back till late. I was outside the window and heard you on the phone."

He had gone very pale and his broad, solid, pleasant face suddenly wore a gray dead look. He explained, almost apologetically, "I've been spying on your house, you see. Waiting for the chance."

"The chance?" she stammered.

He stood there with that dreadful gray look, a sort of blank look as though he spoke from another world; motionless, except when now and again his thick white hands gave a sudden little twitch. "I can't help myself," he said. "This ringing up and all. It's disgusting, I know, and afterwards I feel ashamed. But I can't help it. It's a sort of sickness, I suppose."

He moved in a little from the doorway, came to the end of the big scrubbed wooden table, and stood there with the table between them. She protested, as though to stem his advance with words, to fend off for a little longer the horror to come: "But why me? Why *me*? I'm not some pretty young girl—"

"It's not personal," he said, almost as if that might be reassuring. "I've never even seen you before, except glimpses through the window now and then." And he explained it. "I just look them up in the telephone book. Different places, different counties, even—I couldn't do it too near home. My job takes me about a good deal, and that's a help. But it's more the house, first, really—"

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"The house?"

"Remote houses, hidden-away places like this. I've got to be careful, you see, haven't I? I wouldn't want to be caught. I find a good house and who lives in it, and then I drive over and ring up from some local phone booth. After that it depends on how they react. Sometimes they're cool, they just say, 'You're mad,' and hang up. That kind I don't bother with any more. But if they're upset and disgusted, frightened even—well, I'm afraid it's better then."

He looked down at his hands, fisted, white and bulging, on the table before him. "Perhaps I *am* mad. It's dreadful really. But when it comes on me it's like—well, it's like I said, like a drug or something, I can't resist it. And that's why I have to be so careful, why I mustn't let myself be caught. I couldn't stand prison. What would I do, locked away in there, if the fit came on me? I really *would* go mad then."

She grasped at a faint hope. "The police here know about you. We told them about the calls."

"They can't do a thing," he said, quite kindly, half pityingly. "Not unless they was to tap the line day and night. And you're not the only one. I keep several going at a time, just for safety's sake, and I give them names made up from the names of their houses usually. 'I'll ring Lily at Pond Farm,' I'll say to myself—'lily pond,' you see—or 'I'll ring Ella at Ash Tree House.' That was a tough one—I made it up at last from Cinderella and ashes, you see, well, like cinders. But mostly I don't go to see *them*; they're just to keep the police not knowing where to watch next."

He was silent, for a moment withdrawn, musing. Then he went on in the same kindly voice.

"If they got me now, it would be for life. I killed one of the girls, you see. Accidental, it was, of course—but I killed her."

She gave a little jerked-out, chopped-off scream, scrabbling with bunched-up fingers at her mouth. "Oh, *no!*"

"I didn't mean to," he said unhappily. "I didn't *want* to. In fact, that part I didn't enjoy at all—it all went too far. Poor thing!—such a pretty young girl she was; only she would try to run away. I'd been phoning her, you see—like you say, filthy, obscene. I don't know what makes me do it, honest I don't."

He seemed so sincerely unhappy, so truly distressed. If she could temporize, if she could keep him talking! She had said to him that she was not a pretty young girl, but she recognized in

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herself, without at all consciously exerting it, a natural charm which had brought her much popularity. Now she pulled out, from under the table beside him, a wooden kitchen chair and suggested, "Why don't you sit down? Would you like some tea or something?"

He gave her a sidelong look, making no attempt to sit down. "Are you trying to get round me? That won't do you any good, I'm afraid."

"Well, I wasn't," she said. "I just thought we could—well, talk. You seem to be in so much trouble."

"Yes, I am," he acknowledged. "I'm in trouble all right. You don't think I like being this way? All the worry of it, let alone the danger. And the agony, the awfulness when it's coming on and you're still at the stage of trying to resist it. I've been to the police station before now—a police station of all places!—all on some cooked-up excuse, knowing I'd be safe from it there, that I'd have to behave myself. But the minute I left I was at it worse than ever."

"You could get treatment. You're not the only one—this problem is very well understood nowadays. People do get cured of it."

"A psychiatrist, you mean?"

"You can tell a psychiatrist anything—he's a doctor, you can tell him anything. And just trying to get help, just wanting to be cured—that's a terrifically good sign, you know. It shows that you're on your way to getting better already." He stood looking at her woodenly and she gabbled on. "I mean, being able to talk about it, surely that in itself would be good?—not having to keep these terrible secrets all bottled up inside you."

"But that's it," he said. "They *are* terrible secrets. I could have gone once, but how could I now? These psychiatrists, they can get anything out of you; you can't keep things back, not once you're started. And doctor or no doctor, he wouldn't stand for me having killed that girl. He'd give me away and there'd be a murder charge against me."

He looked at her, almost imploringly. "If only they wouldn't struggle, then I wouldn't hurt them. I don't *mean* to hurt them but I'm—strong. And this girl, you see—I went to see her, I pretended I'd lived in the house once, I often do that if it's an old house. But—well, she wouldn't—you know—*let* me. She struggled, they all struggle, and—I suppose it's dreadful but I'm beginning to realize that it's the struggle I like."

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Almost as though it had reminded him of why he was there, he began to move at last, sidling toward her round the table, his thick fingers white-tipped and spatulate, pressed along the wooden edge.

She was sick and shivering. The familiar room swam round her as though she saw it through water. She started to gibber, backed up, violently trembling, against the oak dresser. "Stay over there! Don't come near me, don't touch me!" But the sad heavy face came closer, regretful, implacable. She sobbed and stammered, "Please don't hurt me, *please*—!"

He stopped again, stood there, humbly explaining, "I don't *want* to hurt you. I wouldn't, you see, if you'd only not struggle, if you'd only be—be kind and easy. I'm just ordinary, you know, just an ordinary man. Bachelor, yes; but a lovely old mother, looks after me like a king; and I'm a good son to her too. Fine job, solid, respectable—no one ever suspects a thing. But when this comes over me . . ."

He fell silent again and into the silence, ash falling in the grate, coals resettling, sounded as loud and harsh as an avalanche. The grandfather clock struck once on a rasping note.

"If you wouldn't all struggle," he said. "But you do; and nowadays, like I say, it's becoming more and more the actual struggle that—that excites me; it's all leading up to that. It used not to be. The telephone calls—they were the thing. But now—it's a sort of revenge, I think, wanting to get the better of women because women have always seemed to—well, not like me."

"But if you do these things—"

"I wouldn't do them if they'd be nice to me. If only just once, one of them was kind—kind and easy and even a little bit loving—I sometimes think I'd be cured of it, give the whole thing up forever."

"Couldn't you get some nice girl of your own?"

"But that's what I'm telling you," he said. "Nice girls won't have me. I suppose they—they sort of sense this other thing. I suppose I sort of—smell of it."

"There are—well, you know, the girls on the street. Poor sad girls, living so dangerously, taking such terrible risks. But—they'd be easy. And I suppose kind?"

"But not loving," he said. "And I want some love, that's what I want. That's what I go about looking for. If—if, even after all the muck and the filth, the telephone calls and all that—if one of

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them was really to understand and forgive, really not blame me, really accept that I'm just an ordinary man, only with this sickness that I can't help—"

He thought it over, rather pathetically. "Quite a nice man I am, really, as men go. Honest, dependable, decent—well, in all other ways. And kind, you know, considerate, good to my mother like I said. There never was a better son, I don't suppose."

"I think you *are* nice," she said. "You're quite right, you *are* nice—a nice, ordinary man. Only I do think you're ill, you need help."

"That's right," he said. "I do need help. And what help can I look for now, except from a woman? I think if I found that, I could begin my life all over again. But till then—"

Till then! She began to move, edging her way almost imperceptibly along the dresser, her hands spread out behind her feeling their way along the polished ledge. It brought him sharply out of his absorption. He said, "That's no use, my dear. If you think you're going to get to the door and get away from me, I'm afraid that's no use. I wouldn't want to kill you, not like that poor girl. *She* tried to run away. But you—I like you, honest I do, no one else has ever been so kind as you, so understanding. But that won't stop me. Unless—" He looked at her wistfully. "If you could be the one!" he said.

She knew now what she must do. She knew there was no other way. She had pulled herself together; the room no longer swam about her; her hands grew steady, dropping from the ledge, hanging at her sides. She said, "Well—I do understand. You're ill. You can't help yourself. And neither can I help myself. Neither of us can."

And sick, shuddering, reluctant, she tore herself from the shelter of the oak dresser and went to him.

He did not stir, just stood there waiting for her. But she saw with a sort of heartbreak that his whole face was transfigured with an incredulous, inarticulate, grateful joy.

She'd had no idea where to strike. Simply, the sharp kitchen knife had thrust itself in and to a vital spot. She found herself weeping, kneeling over him and weeping as he lay there, harmless now and, in his harmlessness, pitiful. So terrible a price to have exacted from him! She and all those other women—if they could but have been "easy and kind." Easy and kind, understand-

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ng, forgiving, "even a little bit loving." But they could not. And so—

And so she was leaving him, lying there on the warm red tiles of her kitchen floor, his broad white face turned up, witless, to the swinging oil lamp. Leaving him there and blundering across to the telephone in the hall. "I didn't mean to kill him! I had to save myself—didn't I? I had to save myself, myself and all those other women to come. And the knife was on the dresser. But I didn't mean to kill him! He was—he was such—"

After all, apart from—all that—he *had* seemed such a nice man.

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Josh Pachter

Invitation to a Murder

We published Josh Pachter's first story, "E. Q. Griffen Earns His Name," in the December 1968 issue of EQMM—when the author was 16 years old. We published his second story, another "adventure of Ellery in Queenland," in the May 1970 issue—when the author was 17 years old. His third story, about Nero Wolfe Griffen, appeared in our August 1971 issue—when the author was 18 years old. And now we give you Josh Pachter's fourth story—written when he was 19 years old, just before his 20th birthday . . .

The envelope was edged in black.

Curious, Branigan put the rest of his mail aside and reached for the jeweled souvenir dagger he used as a letter opener. He slit the envelope open carefully and slid out a square of heavy cream-colored notepaper.

It, too, was black-rimmed.

It was a formal, embossed announcement, and the raised letters read:

Eleanor Madeline Abbott
announces the impending
MURDER
of her husband,
Gregory Eliot Abbott,
at their home,
217 A West 86th Street,
New York City, New York,
between the hours of
nine thirty and eleven o'clock
on the evening of December 16, 1971.
You are cordially invited to attend.

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Branigan read through the invitation twice, then set it down on his desk and picked up the envelope it had come in. Heavy, cream-colored, black-bordered. Addressed in a neat feminine hand to *Chief Inspector Lawrence A. Branigan, New York Police Department, 240 Centre Street, New York City.* No zip code. No return address. Postmarked New York City.

Branigan picked up the announcement and read it again.

Eleanor Abbott, he mused. Mrs. Eleanor Madeline Abbott . . .

He reached for his telephone and began dialing.

Halfway down the dimly lit corridor, before a massive wooden door, they stopped.

The dour-faced butler stretched out a hand to the ornate brass doorknob, twisted it, and pushed the door open.

"In here, sir," he said. "Mrs. Abbott's expecting you."

Branigan nodded thanks and stepped forward.

The room was dim, too. Thick damask curtains hid what might have been windows; subdued lighting trickled down from small translucent panels in the ceiling.

It was a large, plain, sparsely furnished room. No rugs or carpeting on the parquet floor, no paintings hanging on the dark gloomy walls. There was nothing extra in the room, nothing decorative. Every item, every stick of furniture was there because it was functional, because it was needed.

Like the double bed with its head flush to the far wall.

There was a man lying on the bed, propped up almost to a sitting position. His body was invisible, swathed to the neck in blankets, but his wrinkled white face almost shone through the dimness.

Gregory Abbott.

At first Branigan thought he was too late, and Abbott was already dead: the pale-gray eyes, half covered by deeply creased lids, stared emptily across the room; the ravaged face, wreathed in wisps of snowy hair, was perfectly still; no smile of welcome, no frown of disapproval crossed the thin bloodless lips.

Then he noticed the slight rise and fall of the old man's blankets, and separated the faint sound of labored breathing from the steady ticking of the clock that hung on the wall several feet above Abbott's head.

Branigan sighed with relief, and looked away.

To his right a high-backed chair stood against the side wall. A

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young woman sat on the edge of the chair, her hands folded delicately in her lap. She wore a long black gown, set off by a single strand of pearls around her neck and a sparkling solitaire on the fourth finger of her left hand. Soft waves of thick fawn hair cascaded down around her shoulders.

Across the room from Eleanor Abbott a dozen identical chairs stood side by side. The seat closest to Branigan was empty, but each of the others was occupied. And even in the dimness of the room Branigan recognized all eleven faces. Ryan was there, from the Los Angeles Police Department, and DiNapoli from San Francisco, both of whom he had worked with in the past. There was Coszyck, who ran a local detective agency; Huber, an insurance investigator from Boston he had met once before; and Braun, a Cleveland private eye whose picture had just been featured in a national magazine. There was Devereux, a Federal District Court judge from New Orleans; Gould, a St. Louis appellate court justice; and even "the old Fox," just retired from the bench of the United States Supreme Court. Maunders, Detroit's District Attorney, was there, and Szambel from Pittsburgh, and Carpenter, who had left Szambel's staff to become D.A. of Baltimore. They were all looking at him, and he could see that most of them recognized him, too.

Fourteen people in all, lining the walls of a nearly dark, nearly quiet room, the silence broken only by Gregory Abbott's uneasy breathing and by the inexorable ticking of the clock.

Branigan's eyes finally rested on the plain deal table in the center of the room, and on the five objects resting on its surface: a long-bladed kitchen knife, a length of iron pipe, an amber bottle labeled with a skull and crossbones, a thin strand of wire with a wooden grip attached to each end, and a revolver that glinted dully in the dim light of the room.

Branigan eased the door shut behind him, then took a step forward.

Eleanor Abbott stood up. A long brown lock of hair fell across her eyes and she carelessly brushed it back with the tips of her fingers.

"Well," she smiled, "the foreman of the jury has arrived. I'm glad you could make it, Inspector Branigan. Now, if you'll just take your seat, we'll be ready to start."

She spoke softly, pleasantly, almost in a whisper, but her voice carried across the room. It was a good voice, Branigan decided. It

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suited her.

"I'm glad you were *all* able to get here," she resumed, once he was seated. "I wanted a nice even dozen of you—three dedicated police officers, three respected private investigators, three eminent judges, three successful District Attorneys. Twelve of the country's top legal and law-enforcement minds.

"I guess you must be wondering by now just *why* you're all here. Well; *your* reasons for coming are probably all different; you're here because your curiosity was piqued, or because you wanted to save a threatened human life, or perhaps because you didn't have anything better to do tonight. But *my* reason for bringing the twelve of you together is a simple one: as it said in your invitations, I want you to witness a murder."

She paused—dramatically, Branigan realized with a start. He glanced down the row of his colleagues' faces and saw eleven pairs of eyes fixed, unwavering, on Eleanor Abbott. Only the old man in the bed was not looking at her; his blank eyes never moved from an invisible spot on the door across the room.

"Now," she went on, "for some history. I was born in Philadelphia on September 13, 1945. I came to New York about four years ago, when I was twenty-two. Over the next couple of years I lived in a lot of different places around the city and worked a lot of different jobs. About a year and a half ago I was working at a little restaurant in Greenwich Village, waiting on tables.

"One night Gregory came in with a crowd of friends. They ate and left without paying any more attention to me than anyone ever pays to a waitress; but when I got off work a few hours later, Gregory was waiting for me outside."

For the first time since Branigan had entered the room she turned to look at the man on the bed. After a while she sighed and turned back.

"Gregory was an incredible man. He was in his late sixties, but he looked fifty, then, and he had the energy of a man of thirty. He pretty much swept me off my feet—he was charming and full of life, and he was very rich, too. He'd started with a small store that used to be his father's, and he'd built it up into a chain of department stores worth millions.

"So there I was: I'd been living on sixty dollars a week plus tips and thinking I was pretty lucky to be doing that well. Then all of a sudden there was Gregory.

"We were married inside of three months.

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"Please, don't get me wrong. I loved him, I really did. He was a wonderful person, the first person who'd really *cared* about me in years. I would have married him even if he *hadn't* had all that money, and we would have been just as happy.

"It was an exciting marriage for both of us. Gregory never liked sitting still, so we were always moving, doing, going places. There was nothing he liked better than nightclubbing until three or four in the morning, drinking and dancing and—I'd never done that kind of thing before in my life, but it didn't take me long to learn to enjoy it as much as he did. He was a wonderful dancer."

She stopped for a second, looking through them, remembering.

"I used to make him mad," she smiled. "I was always telling him he should start slowing down a little. But he never listened. He—"

She broke off and turned again to the double bed. There was mist in her eyes.

"Less than six months after our wedding Gregory tripped and fell down a flight of stairs. I was with him when it happened. It—it was terrible. The shock of the fall brought on a very serious heart attack.

"He was in critical condition for a long time. Somehow he managed to pull through, but it left him like—like *that*—totally paralyzed. He can't hear or see. He can't even think.

"For some time now the only thing that's changed is the way he looks. He never gets any better or any worse, just every day he looks a little bit older than he did the day before. Gregory's sixty-eight years old, but *look* at him! You'd *swear* he's eighty!

"His doctors say there's no chance that he'll ever recover, but they think that with the proper care and treatment it should be possible to keep him alive for as long as ten years.

"Ten years! Can—can you even *conceive* of what that means? Ten *years!* That's a hundred and twenty months—of *nothing!*

"Nothing. Absolute *nothing.* That's the worst thing in the world that could have happened to Gregory, can you understand that? As long as he was active he was happy, but any time he had to just sit and relax, he was miserable. He knew he was pushing himself too hard, but he just didn't *care.* He couldn't *stand* being idle. If he'd have known *this* was going to happen, he'd have—he would have *killed* himself first! He would have died *gladly* before he'd let himself waste ten years of his life in a—in a bed!"

Then her lips were trembling, and suddenly her face was buried

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in her hands and her whole body was shaking.

Branigan leaned forward. He wanted to go to her, to wipe away the tears he knew were coming—

But suddenly she shuddered and took a long deep breath. When she looked up again, her face was drawn, her eyes were dry and cold.

"There's more to it than that," she went on. "When we got married, Gregory rewrote his will in my favor. Right now my share of his estate is worth close to ten million dollars. And I want that money.

"I've been taking care of Gregory twenty-four hours a day, every day, for more than nine months now, and I'm tired of it. There's too much else to do, too many other things that are more important. I want that money and I want it *now*—while I'm still young enough and attractive enough to enjoy it."

There was something new in her voice, something insistent, almost hypnotic, and they stared at her, as motionless as the old man in the double bed.

"Yes, I love Gregory. *Because* I love him, I just *can't* let him go on like this any more. And *I* can't go on this way any more, either. Which means there's only one thing for me to do.

"I've got to kill him. For both our sakes. I think—I think if Gregory knew I was going to do it, he'd say I was doing the right thing, the only thing."

"Wait a minute," Branigan interrupted, but she smiled at him and said, "I know, Inspector. Murder is against the law, no matter how morally justifiable it might be. That's another reason I brought the twelve of you here: to give you a chance to stop me. If you can, I give you my word I won't try it again.

"But I'm warning you: I am going to kill my husband, tonight, within an hour's time. It's now"—she turned her head to glance at the clock hanging over the bed—"it is now ten o'clock. By eleven o'clock, in one hour, Gregory Abbott will be dead."

No one spoke. The woman in the long black gown sat down to complete silence, except for the weak sound of her husband's breathing and the ticking of the clock on the wall.

They sat looking at each other, quiet, spellbound, waiting, not quite sure what they should be doing, not at all sure there was anything they *could* do.

Until 10:10 when Eleanor Abbott rose, walked quickly to the table of weapons in the center of the room, and picked up the

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amber bottle of poison.

Then they moved, and strong hands grabbed her from both sides before she could step away from the table. Branigan pulled the bottle away from her, and he and Coszyck led her back to her chair. Then they went back to their own seats.

At 10:20 she rose again. She was halfway to the table when Branigan and Coszyck stopped her, turned her around, and again reseated her.

This time they stayed by her chair, one on each side.

Again the old man's breathing and the ticking of the clock were the only sounds in the room. Once Carpenter put a hand to his mouth and coughed softly. Eleanor Abbott seemed not to notice, and Gregory Abbott stared vacantly; the others glared at him.

At 10:30 Huber jumped up and moved impatiently from his seat to the old man's bedside. He went down to his hands and knees and carefully examined the area underneath the bed. As he straightened up, dusting off the legs of his trousers, Braun and Devereux looked at each other, nodded, and got up and joined him. The three ranged themselves on three sides of the bed, watching Abbott and his wife and the clock uneasily.

At 10:40 Eleanor Abbott suddenly stood up, but Branigan and Coszyck clamped firm hands on her shoulders and forced her back into her chair.

Not a word was said.

The red second hand of the clock swept around and around, as the minute hand labored slowly up the numbered face. DiNapoli glanced from the clock to his wrist watch, then quickly back at the clock. He frowned, then silently adjusted his watch so that the two timepieces were synchronized.

At 10:50 Maunders and Fox stood up together, grim-faced, and stepped to the table of weapons, Fox, his arthritic fingers quivering slightly, picked up the dull-black revolver. He broke open the cylinder, emptied out the cartridges, shrugged, put the cartridges in his pocket, snapped the cylinder shut, and placed the gun back at the table.

At 10:55 Branigan and Coszyck rested their hands lightly on Mrs. Abbott's shoulders.

Devereux, at Abbott's bedside, pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket and wiped beads of moisture from his forehead.

The old man on the bed breathed weakly, in and out, in and out, and the pile of blankets rose and fell almost imperceptibly.

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At 10:57 Gould stood up fitfully, then flung himself back into his chair.

10:58. They tensed.

Huber and Braun and Devereux inched closer to the old man's bed. Branigan and Coszyck tightened their grips on Eleanor Abbott's shoulders. Maunders and Fox braced themselves, as if defying her to seize one of the weapons on the table. Even the five men still seated—Szambel, Carpenter. DiNapoli, Ryan, Gould—found themselves on the edges of their chairs, ready to spring into action.

But as the clock on the wall ticked loudly and its minute hand crawled closer and closer to the twelve, Eleanor Abbott sat calmly on her high-backed chair—and didn't move.

At 10:59 Gregory Eliot Abbott's breathing stopped. His wrinkled eyelids flickered, jerked open, then closed.

"Gentlemen!" Eleanor Abbott's voice shot through the uproar. "If you'll all get back to your seats and calm down, I'd be glad to explain."

They obeyed her.

She stood by the side of her chair, watching them, her full lips turned slightly upward.

"I warned you," she said. "I told you I was going to kill him, and I did."

"How?" Huber rasped.

Her smile broadened.

"My husband's accident left his heart much too weak to function normally by itself. In fact, the only thing that kept it going was a certain medication, a heart stimulant he was getting at regular intervals."

Branigan's eyes went wide. She waited, though, until Maunders saw it and Szambel, and DiNapoli.

"Gregory's stimulant," she continued, pointing to the table of weapons, "is kept in that bottle there. It's an extremely powerful drug, which makes it very dangerous to people with normal hearts. If a healthy person was to swallow some of it, his heart would speed up enormously, and would actually burn itself out. That's why the bottle is labeled with a skull and crossbones: even a small dose would be fatal to the wrong person.

"But Gregory needed that stimulant to stay alive, and he needed it frequently. He was due for a dose just after ten o'clock. I

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tried to give it to him, but you stopped me."

"You said it was poison!" Carpenter protested.

"I said no such thing. You *assumed* it was poison. But it was vital medicine for Gregory, and each of the three times I tried to give it to him you prevented me. Without it his heart just wasn't strong enough to keep beating, so he died—almost to the minute I predicted."

The twelve criminologists were silent.

Until, "Well?" Ryan said, his voice thick.

"Well," Eleanor Abbott told them, "there are only two possible things you can do. You can take me into custody and accuse me of murdering my husband—but just stop and think about that for a minute. What good will it do? You'll obviously never get a conviction. After all, *I* tried to save Gregory. *You* are the ones who stopped me, causing his death. *You* killed him, not me. In fact, you might even be *legally* responsible for his death. But even if you're not, once the story gets out of how you sat back and let this happen, your names and reputations will be ruined. Your careers will be over."

"She's right," Judge Gould said heavily. "Sure, she'd get slapped on the wrist for not telling us what was in the bottle, but with a story like this, no jury in the country would convict her of murder."

"And we'd be sunk," Carpenter added. "Nobody would dare to try and make out any kind of case against us, but the publicity would destroy us."

Fox cleared his throat nervously.

"You said we had *two* possible courses of action," he reminded her.

"Yes, I did. You can turn me in—or you can work *with* me. Did I really do anything so terrible? I'm not the only one to benefit from Gregory's death: *Gregory* is better off, too. Together we could make his death look like an unhappy, but unavoidable accident."

"You want us to help you get away with murder?" Szambel demanded.

She held up a hand.

"I'm not asking for any favors. Arrest me and ruin yourselves—or help to protect me. The choice is entirely yours."

"We can't!" Devereux cried. "We've all dedicated our lives to *upholding* the law. How can we turn around now and make a mockery of it?"

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"We've got to," DiNapoli muttered. "She's got us over a barrel. There's no other way out."

Maunders grumbled, "Even if we wanted to, it would be impossible. We'd never get away with it."

"The twelve of *us?*" Judge Gould chuckled grimly. "Don't be ridiculous. Who'd even *think* of challenging us?"

Then Branigan decided, "We'll *all* have to discuss it."

She waved a hand at them and turned away.

They talked. Across the room Eleanor Abbott was unable to make out individual voices or words, but she listened confidently to the meaningless hum, smiled at explosions of protest, smirked at the eventual murmurs of agreement.

When they finally became silent, she turned to face them.

They were staring at her.

"Gentlemen of the jury," she mocked, "have you reached a verdict?"

Branigan stood up. There was a strange light in his eyes, a light that Eleanor Abbott could not have known, a light that had never been there before.

"We have," he said clearly.

And he stopped, waiting.

For an instant she was confused; then she grinned and completed the ritual: "How do you find?"

"We find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree, as charged."

Her smile faded.

"What—what do you mean?" she asked him, not understanding.

But when Branigan left the jury box and walked quickly to the table of weapons in the center of the room and reached out his hand, she understood.

"Q"

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David Ely

No Time To Lose

David Ely's short stories are often tales of horror and the macabre, of terror and gripping suspense, of irony and sardonic humor. Here, in a single short story, are all these qualities . . .

He had heard rumors that such places existed, and he had assumed that the rumors were true, for experience had taught him that every human demand would somehow find a source of supply, no matter how outrageous the demand might be.

And yet he never would have imagined that he himself would be involved in it. He was badly frightened. He knew he might be making a terrible mistake, that he might be on his way to death, not life—and although he was not a religious man he moved his lips in prayer as he sat shivering and perspiring, and all the time he was aware of the dull erratic movements of his heart.

"How much longer?" he asked the driver.

"One more hour, Mr. Kipp."

The car was moving at moderate speed, for the road was steep, narrow, and dangerously pitted. The moon cast a treacherous light; it made the landscape seem gentle. It wasn't, though. Mr. Kipp knew that it was a harsh, rough devil of mountainous upcountry, scarred with deep ravines, its cliffs so baked by sun and scoured by cloudbursts that no living things could grow except for bitter grass and a few stunted scrubby trees. And, of course, the cactus—cactus everywhere, giant plants that seemed to leap up like sentinels as the headlights swept them.

Mr. Kipp shrank back in his seat. Those still vegetable figures with upraised arms might be warning him—*go back, go back*—and yet, ambiguously, they pointed to the heavens, which meant the freedom of eternity—and also death everlasting.

He sought to avoid such thoughts by conversing with the driver. "You must be used to this trip," he said.

"I've done it before, Mr. Kipp."

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"But surely the bulk of your supplies and equipment can't be ought in on a road like this."

"It comes air freight," the driver replied. He was a short swar- y man whose careful English betrayed only a slight accent. There's a little landing pad for helicopters, Mr. Kipp."

"I see."

Mr. Kipp reflected that it would have been far more comfortable r him to have come by helicopter, but he supposed that it would ave been more difficult to keep his arrival secret that way. They ad insisted on secrecy, and he had been so desperate, so driven y panic, that he had obeyed without question, even though his nimal sense of security protested against being so completely cut f.

He had flown to Mexico City two weeks ago. Then, following ie instructions given at every stage, he had traveled south from own to town, from one hotel to the next, establishing himself as a acationing businessman with a leisurely interest in church ar- nitecture but with no particular schedule or itinerary, except iat his course was south, always south.

And now he was far to the north. If something went wrong he ould never be traced. The authorities, when finally notified by is family to search for him, would look fruitlessly in Oaxaca and hiapas and perhaps as far as Yucatan, until, in time, he would e listed as missing, presumed dead. There would be nothing hatever to connect his disappearance with the private estate f Dr. Benavides in the rough wilderness of Durango, hundreds of iiles to the north.

The car struck a pothole, swerved, and skidded to the edge of ie road. Mr. Kipp moaned and clenched his fists, waiting for the ill—but the driver managed the skid quite nicely, and Mr. Kipp's ands soon stopped trembling enough to open the little bottle he ept in his coat pocket. He took out a tranquillizer pill, put it in is mouth, and swallowed it, dry.

"Oh, God," he prayed again, silently. "Pull me through this one, od."

He thought of the ether and the knife, and he thought, too, of is heart, laboring fitfully, and in his anguish he cursed its eakness. How bitter it was to have struggled up in life as he ad, to have overcome so many enemies and obstacles—and now, till youthful at the age of 50, to find that it could end forever for im at any moment.

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"I'll give you everything I've got, God," prayed Mr. Kipp, a
though the operation were to be performed by some priest o
bishop, instead of by the cashiered Army surgeon, Benavide
"Everything, God. I swear it." But Mr. Kipp, a creature of habi
sensed that he was making a sort of contract, the terms of whic
were perhaps unnecessarily generous, and so he amended i
somewhat. "All I want is a little comfort, God. Maybe fift
thousand a year. The rest I don't care about, God. I'll give it t
the church, to charities, whatever you want, God."

He felt a little better. The pretense of making a deal with Go
had fleetingly called into play that complex of instincts which i
Mr. Kipp had been developed into an instrument of great subtlet
and force. He had a gift for deals, no doubt about it. Over th
years he had tumbled many a business rival—the little ones a
first, and then, as he prospered, the bigger ones as well. Mr. Kip
reflected with melancholy satisfaction on his most recent triumpl
(just before he'd got the news about his heart) when he'd manage
to defeat Gorgos himself, the biggest of all. It had been a questio
of having the right amount of liquid capital available at the righ
time, that was all—and, of course, knowing what to do with it.

Mr. Kipp smiled. Yes, old Gorgos had been furious. He hadn'
really been hurt—he was far too rich and powerful to be trouble
by any single loss—but his pride had been affronted, that wa
clear. To be outbid by an upstart like Kipp!

But Mr. Kipp's retrospective enjoyment of his victory wa
short-lived, for, thinking of Gorgos, he remembered the rumor
he'd heard at the time that the old man, so passionately attache
to life, also was being betrayed by his own body—the kidneys, s
it was said—which might have distracted his attention at the crit
ical moment in the deal.

Mr. Kipp shuddered. His own heart trouble, surely that wa
worse. He had gone to the top specialists in the best clinics an
hospitals, and everywhere it had been the same story. "You ma
live for years," they all had told him. "You've got to cut down o
everything, of course, but there's no reason why you can't, i
there?"

No, he couldn't accept that. He wasn't cut out to live a half life
For him it had to be all or nothing—and besides, it was worse
than they thought, he knew it was worse; he could tell that th
very fibers of that wretched heart of his were rotting, rotting, an
all they wanted him to do was lie on a sofa and die by degrees.

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Far up ahead in the darkness beyond the reach of the car's eadlamps he saw the gleam of light.

"Is that it, there?" he asked.

"That's it, Mr. Kipp."

Mr. Kipp tried to compose himself, but he was excited, apprehensive, and also quite fatigued by his long journey. He kept asking himself: *Will it work? Will it work?* And he felt his courage ebb so that he almost decided not to go through with it, and then he thought again of the certain death that lay within him, and he knew that he had no choice but to proceed.

The lights from the Benavides estate grew brighter. It was a large establishment, for Benavides had grown rich in his profession and could afford the finest horses and cattle, with the irrigated pastureland that fed them in fine style, as well as the most modern living and working accommodations for himself and his staff. There were vineyards and orchards and vegetable gardens, too, and the peasants who labored in these fields lived in a cluster of huts near the south entrance to the estate.

Mr. Kipp was acquainted with these matters from his conversations in New York with an acquaintance, Costain, who'd gone through successfully what he himself now was about to begin. Costain, too, had first tried to make arrangements at every major hospital in the states equipped for such operations, and, like Kipp, he had been turned down—or, more precisely, he had been told he'd have to take his place at the bottom of an interminable waiting list.

Those famous surgeons were impervious to bribes, for they had plenty of money; besides, they were the newest heroes of the age, they had become demigods, lifegivers, and for the sake of their incredible prestige, they thought nothing of spurning the desperate offers of wealthy men. Costain, in despair, had thought of organizing a new hospital which would recognize the special claims of affluence—and then he had learned that such a place already existed, south of the Rio Grande.

"A two-months' vacation in Mexico, that's all it amounts to," Costain had told Kipp. "Then you go back every few months for a checkup."

Of course it amounted to a little more than that. The cost was staggering, naturally, but Mr. Kipp, with his shrewd dealer's eye, had arranged matters so that he would not pay a premium for failure. One-half of the fee was being held in escrow in New York, to

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be disbursed only on his return to that city. He had felt much encouraged when Benavides' agent accepted these terms, because it indicated that the good doctor had considerable confidence in the outcome.

The car was moving rapidly toward the estate now, for here the road was straight. They passed the peasant huts, in which lanterns dimly glowed, and Mr. Kipp, hearing the chatter and laughter of family life, was suddenly troubled by certain disquieting thoughts, and he was forced to compose his mind with severe effort. No good thinking about *that,* he told himself angrily.

Still, he could hardly help it. Everything seemed to conspire to bring it to mind. Once within the estate they passed the barns, one of which was brightly lighted, with its great doors swung wide, and although Mr. Kipp sought to fasten his attention on the truly magnificent beasts he glimpsed—cattle and pigs—he was unable to avoid noticing three or four young workmen gathered there. One glance was enough—yes, they were sturdy fellows in the youthful prime of life, bursting with energy and good spirits, who doubtless hadn't been ill a day in their lives—absolutely perfect human specimens.

Dr. Benavides must certainly be a model employer, Mr. Kipp reflected. These people ordinarily would live a life of deprivation, of near-starvation; in fact, they'd be better off dead, most of them—but under Dr. Benavides they had plenty to eat and prompt medical attention in case they were ever ill, and if—as he supposed, although Costain had delicately skirted this question—if now and then one of them met with some unfortunate accident . . . well, that wasn't too terrible a price to pay, was it, so that the little community as a whole could prosper?

No, no, not at all, thought Mr. Kipp, and he conceived of these young workers as being heroes—even if it was not exactly voluntary or conscious heroism—and since he himself would be connected with their heroism and spirit of sacrifice, he felt tears of sympathy force their way into his eyes. Yes, he managed to tell himself, he had come down from New York not entirely selfishly, for he was a necessary part of a basically benevolent system which had raised the standard of living of these poor people—

His thoughts were cut short. They had arrived at the main building.

The car door swung open.

"Mr. Kipp?"

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Dr. Benavides himself had come out to meet him and to escort him inside.

Mr. Kipp was terribly weary from his trip, and his mind was bemused by the thoughts he had lately sustained in it, so that he was not fully aware of what was taking place. He was given a tot of brandy, he shook hands with several of the staff doctors, and then he was conducted to a huge bathroom where skillful attendants helped him undress and then bathed him thoroughly.

Now for bed, thought Mr. Kipp distractedly, but he was wrong.

Instead, he was taken directly into a huge operating room, helped up on one of the tables, and strapped neatly down.

"You're going to do it right away?" he asked, in some alarm, as Dr. Benavides appeared again, clothed in his surgeon's greens.

"No time to lose, Mr. Kipp," Dr. Benavides replied cheerfully. "No time at all." He began giving orders to various staff members, who moved with quiet competence here and there, readying the equipment, including that of the anesthesiologist, which was brought to the head of Mr. Kipp's table.

Then the doors were opened. A stretcher was wheeled rapidly in and placed alongside Mr. Kipp. On the stretcher was a body—and although Mr. Kipp didn't want to look at it, although he strove with all his might to avoid looking at it, he couldn't help himself. He turned his head.

But it wasn't a young man. Mr. Kipp saw the protruding belly of age, white tufts of hair on the wrinkled chest, and the wattled neck.

Mr. Kipp felt outraged. "That man is *old*," he protested, struggling ineffectively against his straps.

And then he glanced at the face of his neighbor, and he realized that his supposition about the function of the youthful peasants was quite unfounded, and he also realized more fully why Dr. Benavides and his associates had been so insistent that he leave no traces whatever that might lead the authorities north to Durango.

The old man on the stretcher was well known to him. It was, in fact, Gorgos, who was regarding him with a rather wicked grin.

"Thanks for the kidneys, Kipp," said Gorgos. "This time, I outbid *you*."

Dr. Benavides smiled benignly down. "You're the donor in this case, Mr. Kipp," he explained.

And then the anesthetic mask was applied, quite firmly, to Mr. Kipp's face.

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Carter Dickson (John Dickson Carr)

The House in Goblin Wood

As everyone knows (or should know), Carter Dickson and John Dickson Carr are one and the same person, the creator of two of the most famous sleuths in contemporary fiction—Dr. Gideon Fell and Sir Henry Merrivale (H.M.). Long ago the English critic who called himself Torquemada rated Mr. Carr as "one of the Big Five." Torquemada probably meant "one of the Big Five" among English writers; actually it is true among all *writers of the detective story, past and present. . . . Born in 1905 at Uniontown, Pa., John is the son of Wooda Nicholas Carr, formerly a United States Congressman. "At the age of eight," writes John, "I was hauled off to Washington. While my father thundered in Congress, I stood on a table in the members' anteroom, pinwheeled by a God-awful collar, and recited Hamlet's Soliloquy to certain gentlemen named Thomas Heflin and Pat Harrison and Claude Kitchin." At the same tender age John sat on "Uncle Joe" Cannon's knee listening to ghost stories, learned the great American game of crap-shooting from the legislative page boys, and met Woodrow Wilson. John's earliest fictional heroes were Sherlock Holmes, d'Artagnan, and the Wizard of Oz, and all three exerted subtle influences on his later creative development. J. B. Priestley has said that John possesses "a sense of the macabre that lifts him high above the average run of detective story writers." Your Editor once wrote that "despite his preoccupation with Anglo-materia, Mr. Carr is in no sense an expatriate. Rather, he occupies the enviable and eminent position of being our first literary lend-lease; he is the perfect example in the field of the modern detective story of Anglo-American unity" . . .*

Detective: SIR HENRY MERRIVALE (H.M.)

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In Pall Mall, that hot July afternoon three years before the war, an open saloon car was drawn up to the curb just opposite the Senior Conservatives' Club.

And in the car sat two conspirators.

It was the drowsy post-lunch hour among the clubs, where only the sun remained brilliant. The Rag lay somnolent; the Atheneum slept outright. But these two conspirators, a dark-haired young man in his early thirties and a fair-haired girl perhaps half a dozen years younger, never moved. They stared intently at the Gothic-like front of the Senior Conservatives'.

"Look here, Eve," muttered the young man, and punched at the steering wheel. "Do you think this is going to work?"

"I don't know," the fair-haired girl confessed. "He absolutely *loathes* picnics."

"Anyway, we've probably missed him."

"Why so?"

"He can't have taken as long over lunch as that!" her companion protested, looking at a wrist-watch. The young man was rather shocked. "It's a quarter to four! Even if . . ."

"Bill! There! Look there!"

Their patience was rewarded by an inspiring sight.

Out of the portals of the Senior Conservatives' Club, in awful majesty, marched a large, stout, barrel-shaped gentleman in a white linen suit.

His corporation preceded him like the figurehead of a man-of-war. His shell-rimmed spectacles were pulled down on a broad nose, all being shaded by a Panama hat. At the top of the stone steps he surveyed the street with a lordly sneer.

"Sir Henry!" called the girl.

"Hey?" said Sir Henry Merrivale.

"I'm Eve Drayton. Don't you remember me? You knew my father!"

"Oh, ah," said the great man.

"We've been waiting here a terribly long time," Eve pleaded. "Couldn't you see us for just five minutes?—The thing to do," she whispered to her companion, "is to keep him in a good humor. Just keep him in a good humor!"

As a matter of fact, H.M. was in a good humor, having just triumphed over the Home Secretary in an argument. But not even his own mother could have guessed it. Majestically, with the same lordly sneer, he began in grandeur to descend the steps of the

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Senior Conservatives'. He did this, in fact, until his foot encountered an unnoticed object lying some three feet from the bottom.

It was a banana skin.

"Oh, dear!" said the girl.

Now it must be stated with regret that in the old days certain urchins, of what were then called the "lower orders," had a habit of placing such objects on the steps in the hope that some eminent statesman would take a toss on his way to Whitehall. This was a venial but deplorable practice, probably accounting for what Mr. Gladstone said in 1882.

In any case, it accounted for what Sir Henry Merrivale said now.

From the pavement, where H.M. landed in a seated position, arose in H.M.'s bellowing voice such a torrent of profanity, such a flood of invective and vile obscenities, as has seldom before blasted the holy calm of Pall Mall. It brought the hall-porter hurrying down the steps, and Eve Drayton flying out of the car.

Heads were now appearing at the windows of the Atheneum across the street.

"Is it all right?" cried the girl, with concern in her blue eyes. "Are you hurt?"

H.M. merely looked at her. His hat had fallen off, disclosing a large bald head; and he merely sat on the pavement and looked at her.

"Anyway, H.M., get up! Please get up!"

"Yes, sir," begged the hall-porter, "for heaven's sake get up!"

"Get up?" bellowed H.M., in a voice audible as far as St. James' Street. "Burn it all, how *can* I get up?"

"But why not?"

"My behind's out of joint," said H.M. simply. "I'm hurt awful bad. I'm probably goin' to have spinal dislocation for the rest of my life."

"But, sir, people are looking!"

H.M. explained what these people could do. He eyed Eve Drayton with a glare of indescribable malignancy over his spectacles.

"I suppose, my wench, *you're* responsible for this?"

Eve regarded him in consternation.

"You don't mean the banana skin?" she cried.

"Oh, yes, I do," said H.M., folding his arms like a prosecuting counsel.

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"But we—we only wanted to invite you to a picnic!"

H.M. closed his eyes.

"That's fine," he said in a hollow voice. "All the same, don't you think it'd have been a subtler kind of hint just to pour mayonnaise over my head or shove ants down the back of my neck? Oh, lord love a duck!"

"I didn't mean that! I meant . . ."

"Let me help you up, sir," interposed the calm, reassuring voice of the dark-haired and blue-chinned young man who had been with Eve in the car.

"So you want to help too, hey? And who are *you?*"

"I'm awfully sorry!" said Eve. "I should have introduced you! This is my fiancé. Dr. William Sage."

H.M.'s face turned purple.

"I'm glad to see," he observed, "you had the uncommon decency to bring along a doctor. I appreciate that, I do. And the car's there, I suppose, to assist with the examination when I take off my pants?"

The hall-porter uttered a cry of horror.

Bill Sage, either from jumpiness and nerves or from sheer inability to keep a straight face, laughed loudly.

"I keep telling Eve a dozen times a day," he said, "that I'm not to be called 'doctor.' I happen to be a surgeon—"

(Here H.M. really did look alarmed.)

"—but I don't think we need operate. Nor, in my opinion," Bill gravely addressed the hall-porter, "will it be necessary to remove Sir Henry's trousers in front of the Senior Conservatives' Club."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"We had an infernal nerve to come here," the young man confessed to H.M. "But I honestly think, Sir Henry, you'd be more comfortable in the car. What about it? Let me give you a hand up?"

Yet even ten minutes later, when H.M. sat glowering in the back of the car and two heads were craned round towards him, peace was not restored.

"All right!" said Eve. Her pretty, rather stolid face was flushed; her mouth looked miserable. "If you won't come to the picnic, you won't. But I did believe you might do it to oblige me."

"Well . . . now!" muttered the great man uncomfortably.

"And I did think, too, you'd be interested in the other person who was coming with us. But Vicky's—difficult. She won't come

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either, if you don't."

"Oh? And who's this other guest?"

"Vicky Adams."

H.M.'s hand, which had been lifted for an oratorical gesture, dropped to his side.

"Vicky Adams? That's not the gal who . . .?"

"Yes!" Eve nodded. "They say it was one of the great mysteries, twenty years ago, that the police failed to solve."

"It was, my wench," H.M. agreed sombrely. "It was."

"And now Vicky's grown up. And we thought if you of all people went along, and spoke to her nicely, she'd tell us what really happened on that night."

H.M.'s small, sharp eyes fixed disconcertingly on Eve.

"I say, my wench. What's your interest in all this?"

"Oh, reasons." Eve glanced quickly at Bill Sage, who was again punching moodily at the steering wheel, and checked herself. "Anyway, what difference does it make now? If you won't go with us . . ."

H.M. assumed a martyred air.

"I never said I *wasn't* goin' with you, did I?" he demanded. (This was inaccurate, but no matter.) "Even after you practically made a cripple of me, I never said I *wasn't* goin'?" His manner grew flurried and hasty. "But I got to leave now," he added apologetically. "I got to get back to my office."

"We'll drive you there, H.M."

"No, no, no," said the practical cripple, getting out of the car with surprising celerity. "Walkin' is good for my stomach if it's not so good for my behind. I'm a forgivin' man. You pick me up at my house tomorrow morning. G'bye."

And he lumbered off in the direction of the Haymarket.

It needed no close observer to see that H.M. was deeply abstracted. He remained so abstracted, indeed, as to be nearly murdered by a taxi at the Admiralty Arch; and he was halfway down Whitehall before a familiar voice stopped him.

"Afternoon, Sir Henry!"

Burly, urbane, buttoned up in blue serge, with his bowler hat and his boiled blue eye, stood Chief Inspector Masters.

"Bit odd," the Chief Inspector remarked affably, "to see you taking a constitutional on a day like this. And how are you, sir?"

"Awful," said H.M. instantly. "But that's not the point. Masters, you crawlin' snake! You're the very man I wanted to see."

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Few things startled the Chief Inspector. This one did.

"You," he repeated, "wanted to see *me?*"

"Uh-huh."

"And what about?"

"Masters, do you remember the Victoria Adams case about twenty years ago?"

The Chief Inspector's manner suddenly changed and grew wary.

"Victoria Adams case?" he ruminated. "No, sir, I can't say I do."

"Son, you're lyin'! You were sergeant to old Chief Inspector Rutherford in those days, and well I remember it!"

Masters stood on his dignity.

"That's as may be, sir. But twenty years ago . . ."

"A little girl of twelve or thirteen, the child of very wealthy parents, disappeared one night out of a country cottage with all the doors and windows locked on the inside. A week later, while everybody was havin' screaming hysterics, the child reappeared again: through the locks and bolts, tucked up in her bed as usual. And to this day nobody's ever known what really happened."

There was a silence, while Masters shut his jaws hard.

"This family, the Adamses," persisted H.M., "owned the cottage, down Aylesbury way, on the edge of Goblin Wood, opposite the lake. Or was it?"

"Oh, ah," growled Masters. "It was."

H.M. looked at him curiously.

"They used the cottage as a base for bathin', in summer, and ice-skatin' in winter. It was black winter when the child vanished, and the place was all locked up inside against drafts. They say her old man nearly went loopy when he found her there a week later, lying asleep under the lamp. But all she'd say, when they asked her where she'd been, was, *'I don't know.'* "

Again there was a silence, while red buses thundered through the traffic press of Whitehall.

"You've got to admit, Masters, there was a flaming public rumpus. I say: did you ever read Barrie's *Mary Rose?*"

"No."

"Well, it was a situation straight out of Barrie. Some people, y'see, said that Vicky Adams was a child of faërie who'd been spirited away by the pixies . . ."

Whereupon Masters exploded.

He removed his bowler hat and made remarks about pixies, in detail, which could not have been bettered by H.M. himself.

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"I know, son, I know." H.M. was soothing. Then his big voice sharpened. "Now tell me. Was all this talk strictly true?"

"What talk?"

"Locked windows? Bolted doors? No attic-trap? No cellar? Solid walls and floor?"

"Yes, sir," answered Masters, regaining his dignity with a powerful effort, "I'm bound to admit it *was* true."

"Then there wasn't any jiggery-pokery about the cottage?"

"In your eye there wasn't," said Masters.

"How d'ye mean?"

"Listen, sir." Masters lowered his voice. "Before the Adamses took over that place, it was a hideout for Chuck Randall. At that time he was the swellest of the swell mob; we lagged him a couple of years later. Do you think Chuck wouldn't have rigged up some gadget for a getaway? Just so! Only . . ."

"Well? Hey?"

"We couldn't find it," grunted Masters.

"And I'll bet that pleased old Chief Inspector Rutherford?"

"I tell you straight: he was fair up the pole. Especially as the kid herself was a pretty kid, all big eyes and dark hair. You couldn't help trusting her story."

"Yes," said H.M. "That's what worries me."

"Worries you?"

"Oh, my son!" said H.M. dismally. "Here's Vicky Adams, the spoiled daughter of dotin' parents. She's supposed to be 'odd' and 'fey.' She's even encouraged to be. During her adolescence, the most impressionable time of her life, she gets wrapped round with the gauze of a mystery that people talk about even yet. What's that woman like now. Masters? What's that woman like now?"

"Dear Sir Henry!" murmured Miss Vicky Adams in her softest voice.

She said this just as William Sage's car, with Bill and Eve Drayton in the front seat, and Vicky and H.M. in the back seat, turned off the main road. Behind them lay the smoky-red roofs of Aylesbury, against a brightness of late afternoon. The car turned down a side road, a damp tunnel of greenery, and into another road which was little more than a lane between hedgerows.

H.M.—though cheered by three good-sized picnic hampers from Fortnum & Mason, their wickerwork lids bulging with a feast—did not seem happy. Nobody in that car was happy, with the possible

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exception of Miss Adams herself.

Vicky, unlike Eve, was small and dark and vivacious. Her large light-brown eyes, with very black lashes, could be arch and coy; or they could be dreamily intense. The late Sir James Barrie might have called her a sprite. Those of more sober views would have recognized a different quality: she had an inordinate sex-appeal, which was as palpable as a physical touch to any male within yards. And despite her smallness, Vicky had a full voice like Eve's. All these qualities she used even in so simple a matter as giving traffic directions.

"First right," she would say, leaning forward to put her hands on Bill Sage's shoulders. "Then straight on until the next traffic light. Ah, clever boy!"

"Not at all, not at all!" Bill would disclaim, with red ears and rather an erratic style of driving.

"Oh, yes, you are!" And Vicky would twist the lobe of his ear, playfully, before sitting back again.

(Eve Drayton did not say anything. She did not even turn round. Yet the atmosphere, even of that quiet English picnic-party, had already become a trifle hysterical.)

"Dear Sir Henry!" murmured Vicky, as they turned down into the deep lane between the hedgerows. "I do wish you wouldn't be so materialistic! I do, really. Haven't you the tiniest bit of spirituality in your nature?"

"Me?" said H.M. in astonishment. "I got a very lofty spiritual nature. But what I want just now, my wench, is grub.—Oi!"

Bill Sage glanced round.

"By that speedometer," H.M. pointed, "we've now come forty-six miles and a bit. We didn't even leave town until people of decency and sanity were having their tea. Where are we *going?*"

"But didn't you know?" asked Vicky, with wide-open eyes. "We're going to the cottage where I had such a dreadful experience when I was a child."

"Was it such a dreadful experience, Vicky dear?" inquired Eve.

Vicky's eyes seemed far away.

"I don't remember, really. I was only a child, you see. I didn't understand. I hadn't developed the power for myself then."

"What power?" H.M. asked sharply.

"To dematerialize," said Vicky. "Of course."

In that warm sun-dusted lane, between the hawthorn hedges, the car jolted over a rut. Crockery rattled.

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"Uh-huh. I see," observed H.M. without inflection. "And where do you go, my wench, when you dematerialize?"

"Into a strange country. Through a little door. You wouldn't understand. Oh, you *are* such Philistines!" moaned Vicky. Then, with a sudden change of mood, she leaned forward and her whole physical allurement flowed again towards Bill Sage. "*You* wouldn't like me to disappear, would you, Bill?"

(Easy! Easy!)

"Only," said Bill, with a sort of wild gallantry, "if you promised to reappear again straightaway."

"Oh, I should have to do that." Vicky sat back. She was trembling. "The power wouldn't be strong enough. But even a poor little thing like me might be able to teach you a lesson. Look there!"

And she pointed ahead.

On their left, as the lane widened, stretched the ten-acre gloom of what is fancifully known as Goblin Wood. On their right lay a small lake, on private property and therefore deserted.

The cottage—set well back into a clearing of the wood so as to face the road, screened from it by a line of beeches—was in fact a bungalow of rough-hewn stone, with a slate roof. Across the front of it ran a wooden porch. It had a seedy air, like the long yellow-green grass of its front lawn. Bill parked the car at the side of the road, since there was no driveway.

"It's a bit lonely, ain't it?" demanded H.M. His voice boomed out against that utter stillness, under the hot sun.

"Oh, yes!" breathed Vicky. She jumped out of the car in a whirl of skirts. "That's why *they* were able to come and take me. When I was a child."

"They?"

"Dear Sir Henry! Do I need to explain?"

Then Vicky looked at Bill.

"I must apologize," she said, "for the state the house is in. I haven't been out here for months and months. There's a modern bathroom, I'm glad to say. Only paraffin lamps, of course. But then," a dreamy smile flashed across her face, "you won't need lamps, will you? Unless . . ."

"You mean," said Bill, who was taking a black case out of the car, "unless you disappear again?"

"Yes, Bill. And promise me you won't be frightened when I do."

The young man uttered a ringing oath which was shushed by Sir Henry Merrivale, who austerely said he disapproved of profan-

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ity. Eve Drayton was very quiet.

"But in the meantime," Vicky said wistfully, "let's forget it all, shall we? Let's laugh and dance and sing and pretend we're children! And surely our guest must be even more hungry by this time?"

It was in this emotional state that they sat down to their picnic.

H.M., if the truth must be told, did not fare too badly. Instead of sitting on some hummock of ground, they dragged a table and chairs to the shaded porch. All spoke in strained voices. But no word of controversy was said. It was only afterwards, when the cloth was cleared, the furniture and hampers pushed indoors, the empty bottles flung away, that danger tapped a warning.

From under the porch Vicky fished out two half-rotted deck-chairs, which she set up in the long grass of the lawn. These were to be occupied by Eve and H.M., while Vicky took Bill Sage to inspect a plum tree of some remarkable quality she did not specify.

Eve sat down without comment. H.M., who was smoking a black cigar opposite her, waited some time before he spoke.

"Y' know," he said, taking the cigar out of his mouth, "you're behaving remarkably well."

"Yes." Eve laughed. "Aren't I?"

"Are you pretty well acquainted with this Adams gal?"

"I'm her first cousin," Eve answered simply. "Now that her parents are dead, I'm her only relative. I know *all* about her."

From far across the lawn floated two voices saying something about wild strawberries. Eve, her fair hair and fair complexion vivid against the dark line of Goblin Wood, clenched her hands on her knees.

"You see, H.M.," she hesitated, "there was another reason why I invited you here. I—I don't quite know how to approach it."

"I'm the old man," said H.M., tapping himself impressively on the chest. "You tell me."

"Eve, darling!" interposed Vicky's voice, crying across the ragged lawn. "Coo-ee! Eve!"

"Yes, dear?"

"I've just remembered," cried Vicky, "that I haven't shown Bill over the cottage! You don't mind if I steal him away from you for a little while?"

"No, dear! Of course not!"

It was H.M., sitting so as to face the bungalow, who saw Vicky and Bill go in. He saw Vicky's wistful smile as she closed the door

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after them. Eve did not even look round. The sun was declining, making fiery chinks through the thickness of Goblin Wood behind the cottage.

"I won't let her have him," Eve suddenly cried. "I won't! I won't! I won't!"

"Does she want him, my wench? Or, which is more to the point, does he want her?"

"He never has," Eve said with emphasis. "Not really. And he never will."

H.M., motionless, puffed out cigar smoke.

"Vicky's a faker," said Eve. "Does that sound catty?"

"Not necessarily. I was just thinkin' the same thing myself."

"I'm patient," said Eve. Her blue eyes were fixed. "I'm terribly, terribly patient. I can wait years for what I want. Bill's not making much money now, and I haven't got a bean. But Bill's got great talent under that easy-going manner of his. He *must* have the right girl to help him. If only . . ."

"If only the elfin sprite would let him alone. Hey?"

"Vicky acts like that," said Eve, "towards practically every man she ever meets. That's why she never married. She says it leaves her soul free to commune with other souls. This occultism—"

Then it all poured out, the family story of the Adamses. This repressed girl spoke at length, spoke as perhaps she had never spoken before. Vicky Adams, the child who wanted to attract attention, her father Uncle Fred and her mother Aunt Margaret seemed to walk in vividness as the shadows gathered.

"I was too young to know her at the time of the 'disappearance,' of course. But, oh, I knew her afterwards! And I thought . . ."

"Well?"

"If I could get *you* here," said Eve, "I thought she'd try to show off with some game. And then you'd expose her. And Bill would see what an awful faker she is. But it's hopeless! It's hopeless!"

"Looky here," observed H. M., who was smoking his third cigar. He sat up. "Doesn't it strike you those two are being a rummy-awful long time just in lookin' through a little bungalow?"

Eve, roused out of a dream, stared back at him. She sprang to her feet. She was not now, you could guess, thinking of any disappearance.

"Excuse me a moment," she said curtly.

Eve hurried across to the cottage, went up on the porch, and opened the front door. H.M. heard her heels rap down the length

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f the small passage inside. She marched straight back again, losed the front door, and rejoined H. M.

"All the doors of the rooms are shut," she announced in a high oice, "I really don't think I ought to disturb them."

"Easy, my wench!"

"I have absolutely no interest," declared Eve, with the tears oming into her eyes, "in what happens to either of them now. hall we take the car and go back to town without them?"

H. M. threw away his cigar, got up, and seized her by the houlders.

"I'm the old man," he said, leering like an ogre. "Will you listen o me?"

"No!"

"If I'm any reader of the human dial," persisted H.M., "that oung feller's no more gone on Vicky Adams than I am. He was cared, my wench. Scared." Doubt, indecision crossed H.M.'s face. I dunno what he's scared of. Burn me, I don't! But . . ."

"Hoy!" called the voice of Bill Sage.

It did not come from the direction of the cottage.

They were surrounded on three sides by Goblin Wood, now blurred with twilight. From the north side the voice bawled at hem, followed by crackling in dry undergrowth. Bill, his hair and ports coat and flannels more than a little dirty, regarded them vith a face of bitterness.

"Here are her blasted wild strawberries," he announced, extending his hand. "Three of 'em. The fruitful (excuse me) result of hree quarters of an hour's hard labor. I absolutely refuse to chase em in the dark."

For a moment Eve Drayton's mouth moved without speech.

"Then you weren't . . . in the cottage all this time?"

"In the cottage?" Bill glanced at it. "I was in that cottage," he said, "about five minutes. Vicky had a woman's whim. She wanted some wild strawberries out of what she called the forest.' "

"Wait a minute, son!" said H.M. very sharply. "You didn't come out that front door. Nobody did."

"No! I went out the back door! It opens straight on the wood."

"Yes. And what happened then?"

"Well, I went to look for these damned . . ."

"No, no! What did *she* do?"

"Vicky? She locked and bolted the back door on the inside. I

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remember her grinning at me through the glass panel. She—"

Bill stopped short. His eyes widened, and then narrowed, as though at the impact of an idea. All three of them turned to look at the rough-stone cottage.

"By the way," said Bill. He cleared his throat vigorously. "By the way, have you seen Vicky since then?"

"No."

"This couldn't be . . . ?"

"It could be, son," said H.M. "We'd all better go in there and have a look."

They hesitated for a moment on the porch. A warm, moist fragrance breathed up from the ground after sunset. In half an hour it would be completely dark.

Bill Sage threw open the front door and shouted Vicky's name. That sound seemed to penetrate, reverberating, through every room. The intense heat and stuffiness of the cottage, where no window had been raised in months, blew out at them. But nobody answered.

"Get inside," snapped H.M. "And stop yowlin'." The Old Maestro was nervous. "I'm dead sure she didn't get out by the front door; but we'll just make certain there's no slippin' out now."

Stumbling over the table and chairs they had used on the porch, he fastened the front door. They were in a narrow passage, once handsome with parquet floor and pine-paneled walls, leading to a door with a glass panel at the rear. H.M. lumbered forward to inspect this door and found it locked and bolted, as Bill had said.

Goblin Wood grew darker.

Keeping well together, they searched the cottage. It was not large, having two good-sized rooms on one side of the passage, and two small rooms on the other side, so as to make space for bathroom and kitchenette. H.M., raising fogs of dust, ransacked every inch where a person could possibly hide.

And all the windows were locked on the inside. And the chimney-flues were too narrow to admit anybody.

And Vicky Adams wasn't there.

"Oh, my eye!" breathed Sir Henry Merrivale.

They had gathered, by what idiotic impulse not even H.M. could have said, just outside the open door of the bathroom. A bath-tap dripped monotonously. The last light through a frosted-glass window showed three faces hung there as though disembodied.

"Bill," said Eve in an unsteady voice, "this is a trick. Oh, I've

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longed for her to be exposed! This is a trick!"

"Then where is she?"

"H.M. can tell us! Can't you, H.M.?"

"Well . . . now," muttered the great man.

Across H.M.'s Panama hat was a large black handprint, made there when he had pressed down the hat after investigating a chimney. He glowered under it.

"Son," he said to Bill, "there's just one question I want you to answer in all this hokey-pokey. When you went out pickin' wild strawberries, will you swear Vicky Adams didn't go with you?"

"As God is my judge, she didn't," returned Bill, with fervency and obvious truth. "Besides, how the devil could she? Look at the lock and bolt on the back door!"

H.M. made two more violent black handprints on his hat.

He lumbered forward, his head down, two or three paces in the narrow passage. His foot half-skidded on something that had been lying there unnoticed, and he picked it up, It was a large, square section of thin, waterproof oilskin, jagged at one corner.

"Have you found anything?" demanded Bill in a strained voice.

"No. Not to make any sense, that is. But just a minute!"

At the rear of the passage, on the left-hand side, was the bedroom from which Vicky Adams had vanished as a child. Though H.M. had searched this room once before, he opened the door again.

It was now almost dark in Goblin Wood.

He saw dimly a room of twenty years before: a room of flounces, of lace curtains, of once-polished mahogany, its mirrors glimmering against white-papered walls. H.M. seemed especially interested in the windows.

He ran his hands carefully round the frame of each, even climbing laboriously up on a chair to examine the tops. He borrowed a box of matches from Bill; and the little spurts of light, following the rasp of the match, rasped against nerves as well. The hope died out of his face, and his companions saw it.

"H.M.," Bill said for the dozenth time, "where is she?"

"Son," replied H.M. despondently, "I don't know."

"Let's get out of here," Eve said abruptly. Her voice was a small scream. "I kn-know it's all a trick! I know Vicky's a faker! But let's get out of here. For God's sake let's get out of here!"

"As a matter of fact," Bill cleared his throat, "I agree. Anyway, we won't hear from Vicky until tomorrow morning."

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"*Oh, yes, you will,*" whispered Vicky's voice out of the darkness.

Eve screamed.

They lighted a lamp.

But there was nobody there.

Their retreat from the cottage, it must be admitted, was not very dignified.

How they stumbled down that ragged lawn in the dark, how they piled rugs and picnic-hampers into the car, how they eventually found the main road again, is best left undescribed.

Sir Henry Merrivale has since sneered at this—"a bit of a goosy feeling; nothin' much,"—and it is true that he has no nerves to speak of. But he can be worried, badly worried; and that he was worried on this occasion may be deducted from what happened later.

H.M., after dropping in at Claridge's for a modest late supper of lobster and *Pêche Melba,* returned to his house in Brook Street and slept a hideous sleep. It was three o'clock in the morning, even before the summer dawn, when the ringing of the bedside telephone roused him.

What he heard sent his blood pressure soaring.

"Dear Sir Henry!" crooned a familiar and spite-like voice.

H.M. was himself again, full of gall and bile. He switched on the bedside lamp and put on his spectacles with care, so as adequately to address the 'phone.

"Have I got the honor," he said with dangerous politeness, "of addressin' Miss Vicky Adams?"

"Oh, yes!"

"I sincerely trust," said H.M., "you've been havin' a good time? Are you materialized yet?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Where are you now?"

"I'm afraid," there was coy laughter in the voice, "that must be a little secret for a day or two. I want to teach you a really *good* lesson. Blessings, dear."

And she hung up the receiver.

H.M. did not say anything. He climbed out of bed. He stalked up and down the room, his corporation majestic under an old-fashioned nightshirt stretching to his heels. Then, since he himself had been waked up at three o'clock in the morning, the obvious course was to wake up somebody else; so he dialed the home

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number of Chief Inspector Masters.

"No, sir," retorted Masters grimly, after coughing the frog out of his throat, "I do *not* mind you ringing up. Not a bit of it!" He spoke with a certain pleasure. "Because I've got a bit of news for you."

H.M. eyed the 'phone suspiciously.

"Masters, are you trying to do me in the eye again?"

"It's what you always try to do to me, isn't it?"

"All right, all right!" growled H.M. "What's the news?"

"Do you remember mentioning the Vicky Adams case yesterday?"

"Sort of. Yes."

"Oh, ah! Well, I had a word or two round among our people. I was tipped the wink to go and see a certain solicitor. He was old Mr. Fred Adams's solicitor before Mr. Adams died about six or seven years ago."

Here Masters' voice grew triumphant.

"I always said, Sir Henry, that Chuck Randall had planted some gadget in that cottage for a quick getaway. And I was right. The gadget was . . ."

"You were quite right, Masters. The gadget was a trick window."

The telephone, so to speak, gave a start.

"What's that?"

"A trick window." H.M. spoke patiently. "You press a spring. And the whole frame of the window, two leaves locked together, slides down between the walls far enough so you can climb over. Then you push it back up again."

"How in lum's name do you know that?"

"Oh, my son! They used to build windows like it in country houses during the persecution of Catholic priests. It was a good enough *second* guess. Only . . . it won't work."

Masters seemed annoyed. "It won't work now," Masters agreed. "And do you know why?"

"I can guess. Tell me."

"Because, just before Mr. Adams died, he discovered how his darling daughter had flummoxed him. He never told anybody except his lawyer. He took a handful of four-inch nails, and sealed up the top of that frame so tight an orangutang couldn't move it, and painted 'em over so they wouldn't be noticed."

"Uh-huh. You can notice 'em now."

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"I doubt if the young lady herself ever knew. But, by George!" Masters said savagely. "I'd like to see anybody try the same game now!"

"You would, hey? Then will it interest you to know that the same gal has just disappeared out of the same house AGAIN?"

H.M. began a long narrative of the facts, but he had to break off because the telephone was raving.

"Honest, Masters," H.M. said seriously, "I'm not joking. She didn't get out through that window. But she did get out. You'd better meet me," he gave directions, "tomorrow morning. In the meantime, son, sleep well."

It was, therefore, a worn-faced Masters who went into the Visitors' Room at the Senior Conservatives' Club just before lunch on the following day.

The Visitors' Room is a dark sepulchral place, opening on an air-well, where the visitor is surrounded by pictures of dyspeptic-looking gentlemen with beards. It has a pervading mustiness of wood and leather. Though whiskey and soda stood on the table, H.M. sat in a leather chair far away from it, ruffling his hands across his bald head.

"Now, Masters, keep your shirt on!" he warned. "This business may be rummy. But it's not a police matter—yet."

"I know it's not a police matter," Masters said grimly. "All the same, I've had a word with the Superintendent at Aylesbury."

"Fowler?"

"You know him?"

"Sure. I know everybody. Is he goin' to keep an eye out?"

"He's going to have a look at that ruddy cottage. I've asked for any telephone calls to be put through here. In the meantime, sir—"

It was at this point, as though diabolically inspired, that the telephone rang. H.M. reached it before Masters.

"It's the old man," he said, unconsciously assuming a stance of grandeur. "Yes, yes! Masters is here, but he's drunk. You tell me first. What's that?"

The telephone talked thinly.

"Sure I looked in the kitchen cupboard," bellowed H.M. "Though I didn't honestly expect to find Vicky Adams hidin' there. What's that? Say it again! Plates? Cups that had been . . ."

An almost frightening change had come over H.M.'s expression. He stood motionless. All the posturing went out of him. He was

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ot even listening to the voice that still talked thinly, while his yes and his brain moved to put together facts. At length (though he voice still talked) he hung up the receiver.

H.M. blundered back to the center table, where he drew out a hair and sat down.

"Masters," he said very quietly, "I've come close to makin' the illiest mistake of my life."

Here he cleared his throat.

"I shouldn't have made it, son. I really shouldn't. But don't yell it me for cuttin' off Fowler. I can tell you now how Vicky Adams lisappeared. And she said one true thing when she said she was going into a strange country."

"How do you mean?"

"She's dead," answered H.M.

The word fell with heavy weight into that dingy room, where he bearded faces looked down.

"Y'see," H.M. went on blankly, "a lot of us were right when we thought Vicky Adams was a faker. She was. To attract attention to herself, she played that trick on her family with the hocused window. She's lived and traded on it ever since. That's what sent me straight in the wrong direction. I was on the alert for some *trick* Vicky Adams might play. So it never occurred to me that this elegant pair of beauties, Miss Eve Drayton and Mr. William Sage, were deliberately conspirin' to murder *her*."

Masters got slowly to his feet.

"Did you say . . . murder?"

"Oh, yes."

Again H.M. cleared his throat.

"It was all arranged beforehand for me to be a witness. They knew Vicky Adams couldn't resist a challenge to disappear, especially as Vicky always believed she could get out by the trick window. They wanted Vicky to *say* she was goin' to disappear. They never knew anything about the trick window, Masters. But they knew their own plan very well.

"Eve Drayton even told me the motive. She hated Vicky, of course. But that wasn't the main point. She was Vicky Adams's only relative; she'd inherit an awful big scoopful of money. Eve said she could be patient. (And, burn me, how her eyes meant it when she said that!) Rather than risk any slightest suspicion of murder, she was willing to wait seven years until a disappeared person can be presumed dead.

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"Our Eve, I think, was the fiery drivin' force of that conspiracy She was only scared part of the time. Sage was scared all of th time. But it was Sage who did the real dirty work. He lured Vick Adams into that cottage, while Eve kept me in close conversatio on the lawn . . ."

H.M. paused.

Intolerably vivid in the mind of Chief Inspector Masters, wh had seen it years before, rose the picture of the rough-stone bun galow against the darkling wood.

"Masters," said H.M., "why should a bath-tap be dripping in a house that hadn't been occupied for months?"

"Well?"

"Sage, y'see, is a surgeon. I saw him take his black case of instruments out of the car. He took Vicky Adams into that house. In the bathroom he stabbed her, he stripped her, and *he dismembered her body in the bathtub.*—Easy, son!"

"Go on," said Masters without moving.

"The head, the torso, the folded arms and legs, were wrapped up in three large square pieces of thin transparent oilskin. Each was sewed up with coarse thread so the blood wouldn't drip. Last night I found one of the oilskin pieces he'd ruined when his needle slipped at the corner. Then he walked out of the house, with the back door still unlocked, to get his wild-strawberry alibi."

"Sage went out of there," shouted Masters, "leaving the body in the house?"

"Oh, yes," agreed H.M.

"But where did he leave it?"

H.M. ignored this.

"In the meantime, son, what about Eve Drayton? At the end of the arranged three quarters of an hour, she indicated there was hanky-panky between her fiancé and Vicky Adams. She flew into the house. But what did she do?

"She walked to the back of the passage. I heard her. *There she simply locked and bolted the back door.* And then she marched out to join me with tears in her eyes. And these two beauties were ready for investigation."

"Investigation?" said Masters. *"With that body still in the house?"*

"Oh, yes."

Masters lifted both fists.

"It must have given young Sage a shock," said H.M., "when I

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found that piece of waterproof oilskin he'd washed but dropped. Anyway, these two had only two more bits of hokey-pokey. The 'vanished' gal had to speak—to show she was still alive. If you'd been there, son, you'd have noticed that Eve Drayton's got a voice just like Vicky Adams's. If somebody speaks in a dark room, carefully imitatin' a coy tone she never uses herself, the illusion's goin' to be pretty good. The same goes for a telephone.

"It was finished, Masters. All that had to be done was remove the body from the house, and get it far away from there . . ."

"But that's just what I'm asking you, sir! Where was the body all this time? And who in blazes *did* remove the body from the house?"

"All of us did," answered H.M.

"What's that?"

"Masters," said H.M., "aren't you forgettin' the picnic hampers?"

And now, the Chief Inspector saw, H.M. was as white as a ghost. His next words took Masters like a blow between the eyes.

"Three good-sized wickerwork hampers, with lids. After our big meal on the porch, those hampers were shoved inside the house where Sage could get at 'em. He had to leave most of the used crockery behind, in the kitchen cupboard. But three wickerwork hampers from a picnic, and three butcher's parcels to go inside 'em. I carried one down to the car myself. It felt a bit funny . . ."

H.M. stretched out his hand, not steadily, towards the whiskey.

"Y'know," he said, "I'll always wonder if I was carrying the—head."

"Q"

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Jon L. Breen

The House of the Shrill Whispers

Well, Jon L. Breen has done it again! After parody-pastiches of S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance, Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, "Frank Merriswell," Ellery Queen's "L. Larry Cune," John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee, Earl Derr Biggers' Charlie Chan, J. J. Marric's (John Creasey's) Gideon, Emma Lathen's John Putnam Thatcher, Dick Francis, Hugh Pentecost's Pierre Chambrun and John Jericho, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, Isaac Asimov's Black Widowers, Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op, Mr. Breen offers John Dickson Carr-Carter Dickson's Sir Gideon Merrimac, a chuckling blend of Dr. Gideon Fell and Sir Henry Merrivale. And what kind of crime is Old Giddy called upon to investigate? Naturally. A truly impossible one—of an invisible-lighter-than-air-killer-who-can-walk-through-walls-and-leaves-no-footprints. Who could ask for anything more? . . .

Detective: SIR GIDEON MERRIMAC

Millard Carstairs reflected in his first-class carriage seat in the New Orleans-Manchester local that he was not nearly the stuffy, stodgy puritanical Victorian that his jocular friends so insistently accused him of being. For example, take that young girl seated across from him. He was glad her skirt was short and that he enjoyed an unobstructed view of her well-moulded limbs. It didn't embarrass him a bit. Thus, he convinced himself, he was a man of the nineteen-seventies.

True, he was approaching middle age, and a conservative lower upper-class upbringing had convinced him that there were certain proprieties to be observed, even cherished; and true, these proprieties had guided him well through his youth. But he was not a stuffy, stodgy stick-in-the-mud. As if to prove it, he endeavoured

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o engage the young lady in conversation.

Nancy Williston proved to be her name. "Williston. Williston!" ıe exclaimed. "I knew the name was familiar. I think the chances ıre more than fair, dear lady, that we may be getting off at the ıame stop, though that stop is clouded in obscurity and remoteıess."

The fair-haired beauty raised demure eyebrows in surprise. 'And what is your destination, sir?"

"Warwick-on-Stems, The Clifton Place—or the House of the Shrill Whispers, as it's called."

She shuddered. "I hate that name. It frightens me. But you're right. How on earth did you know?"

"I have suddenly remembered that there was a Nancy Williston, Margrove Clifton's ward, that my old friend Billy Clifton, who has summoned me to the House of the Shrill Whispers, grew up with as a sister. He described her to me many times, her fair hair and pert nose and beautiful, delicate features. You seem to fit that description perfectly, and since your name is Nancy Williston, I could only conclude that you are the same young lady. And if I may, I must say I'm delighted that so comely a travelling companion is going to the same destination I am."

"You are perceptive, sir. And your presence does much to relieve me, too. You are so strong and handsome and trustworthy-looking. And I am afraid."

Millard looked at her sharply. She did look afraid. He could see it in her eyes, the same type of fear he had recognized in the voice of his old friend Billy Clifton when the telephoned summons had come. "Why should you be afraid, Miss Williston? I realize that the House of the Shrill Whispers is said to be haunted, and that the ghost of old Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby has been seen to walk there on July 12 of the last year of every decade since 1880, and that today is July 11, 1970, but surely that old superstitious nonsense has no effect upon you."

"It is not only that," she replied tremulously. "There have been other mysterious goings-on at Uncle Margrove's house—threats on his life. Shortly after signing his latest will, leaving everything to Billy and me to share equally and cutting off his other three children, who are all currently visiting him, Uncle Margrove barricaded himself in the guest cottage, ordered it surrounded by artificial snow, had four spotlights placed on the walls to illuminate the premises from sunset to sunrise, engaged eigh-

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teen private security men from Pinkertons' to watch the guest house constantly, and made sure that all the doors and windows were locked and bolted from the inside. Only Answorth is allowed to visit him there."

"Answorth!" Millard exclaimed. "Is that old fellow still there? That old retainer must be a hundred."

"He's only eighty-seven," Nancy corrected, "and he's the only man Uncle Margrove can trust. Answorth brings Uncle Margrove his food and his mail twice a day."

"And yet your uncle is still afraid?" Millard prompted.

"Yes," Nancy Williston returned. "In his letter he talked of an invisible lighter-than-air killer who can walk through walls and leaves no footprints."

"Really!" Millard ejaculated. "That's the same thing Billy mentioned to me. I didn't see how he could be serious. But that could have been what had made him so worried, couldn't it?"

"Yes, it could be worrying. How ironic that Billy and I, named in the will, should be worried, when the other three children, not named in the will, should—should—"

"Yes? Should what?"

"I mustn't say."

"Yes, you must! I'm Billy's best friend. I want to help."

"Very well, then. Should be the object of *our* worry. I'm sure that either Cavendish or Jessica or Franklin wants to murder Uncle. Billy thinks so, too. It's almost as if there was another will by which one of them would inherit. But I know that Uncle wants Billy and me to be his heirs."

"Hmm," Millard pondered. "I wish Old Giddy were about."

"Who?"

"An old friend of mine. Sir Gideon Merrimac, the world's greatest detective. Billy asked me to try and make contact with him, but I was unable to. If only he were here."

A booming voice could be heard from the passage between the cars. "Harrumph! Oh, by Gumbo, harrumph! Deuced bother!"

"I think someone is stuck in the passage between the cars," Nancy Williston suggested.

"Yes," Millard returned, bounding to his feet with determination. He thought he recognized that "Harrumph." He assaulted the passage, and after much pulling and pushing and grunting, the imprisoned colossus was extricated, realizing Millard's hopes. For the scarcely ruffled harrumpher, released from his prison and

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wheezing like a beached whale, could only be one man.

Who else was that fat and ruddy-cheeked? Who else wore two monocles, one in each eye, over a bulbous Fieldsian nose, a full set of gold teeth, and a pristine-white Colonel Sanders goatee? Who else wore a black opera cape in the heat of July, over purple-and-gold-checked tree-sized trousers, from one of whose pockets protruded a flowered handkerchief into which its proprietor periodically wheezed with earth-shattering volume, sometimes causing his cape to flutter and reveal a holstered antique duelling pistol hanging precariously onto his prodigious belly?

Yes, it could not be doubted. It was the man the situation called for—Sir Gideon Merrimac, known far and wide as Old Giddy.

Millard made hurried introductions and invited Old Giddy to sit down with them. When this demanding engineering feat had been adequately accomplished, Millard hopefully asked Old Giddy his destination.

"A haunted house! A ghost house! One called the House of the Shrill Whispers!"

Millard and Nancy gasped in unison. "Then you know about Sir Margrove and the invisible-lighter-than-air-killer-who-can-walk-through-walls-and-leaves-no-footprints?"

Old Giddy's beady eyes lit up behind both monocles. "Of these matters I am sadly ignorant. I was hoping the good solid ghost of Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby might make his scheduled once-every-ten-years appearance, a matter I have been sent to cover by my publisher, who is dismayed by my failure to lay many ghosts lately. But this phantom killer you speak of is unknown to me. I haven't seen old Stinky Clifton since our public-school days, but I don't remember him as a man pursued by invisible killers. Have they caught him yet?"

"No, thank God!" Nancy gasped. "You call Uncle Margrove Old Stinky?"

"Don't they call him that any more?" Old Giddy queried in surprise. "I'm still called Old Giddy. Has Old Stinky gone high-hat on me and grown up? They all seem to do that."

"Have you had any good cases since I saw you last?" Millard enquired.

"Several cases, son, but nothing really up my alley, nothing Old Giddy could stick his grinnin' teeth into. I tracked down an escaped denizen of Marineland that was reported terrorizing little old ladies by peeking in their windows, charges that proved

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groundless, I might add. I also brought to grief some vandals wh were toppling over equipment in a carpet factory. I found th bunco artists who had been cheating a member of a New Yor theatrical club. I discovered the miscreant who barricaded th doorway of a used-car dealer with a pile of unnecessary trimming from 1950 automobiles. I ferreted out the man who stole an amaz ing new formula for baby food. And I finally figured out wh locked Butterick Prattler, the lawyer fellow, in a closet on hi wedding day."

"These sound like fascinating cases," Millard protested.

"Yes, but not really my kind of case, though some came clos enough. A rumored seal, a rocked loom, a rooked Lamb, an im- passable chrome, a miracle- pablum, and a sealed groom. Clos every one of them, but no cigar! But you, son, you talk of an invisible-lighter -than-air-killer-with-wings-who-can-walk-through walls-and-leaves-no-footprints. Now you're talking my language!"

"We never said he had wings," Nancy interjected.

"Miss, I never eliminate a possibility."

"That's the secret of his success," Millard provided.

"You ain't just whistlin' Dixie, honeychile," Old Giddy verified.

"Old Giddy," Nancy probed, "are you English or Southern American?"

"Does it matter? After all, I'm just a character in a detective story and so are we all, so let's get down to the problem at hand without further palaver."

"Look," Millard objected, "you may be a character in a detective story, Old Giddy, but I'm real! Prick me and see if I don't bleed."

"A character in a detective story had jolly well better bleed, son, or it won't be much of a detective story. If we were characters in a novel instead of characters in a short story, I'd discourse with you at appropriate length about the foolishness and absurdity of characters in fiction pretendin' they're real. It leads to characterization and verisimilitude and other elements that stand in the way of a good story. But that is neither here nor there anywhere else."

Millard Carstairs fumed silently. Being accused of not being corporeal didn't bother him personally, but the implication that Nancy also lacked flesh and blood affronted him deeply. Still, Old Giddy was widely proclaimed, by others as well as himself, as a bona-fide genius, and if the delusion that he was a fictional character came as part of the package, so to speak, Millard was

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willing to put up with it—at least, until the problem of the invisible-lighter-than-air-killer-et-cetera had been solved.

The old servant Answorth, looking older than his 87 years, met the trio at the Warwick-on-Stems station with bad news. Or good news, depending on the point of view. Old Giddy appeared positively ecstatic about it.

"Sir Margrove Clifton," the retainer quavered, "has been murdered in the guest cottage. All the doors and windows were triple-locked and triple-bolted from the inside. The cottage was surrounded by artificial snow in which no footprints appear. All sides of the cottage were spotlighted and watched by Pinkerton men, especially hired for the purpose, and they saw no one approach the guest cottage. I must conclude that the ghost of Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby has walked and killed. He was a rather pleasant and well-behaved ghost up to now, but his latest escapade has tried my patience severely."

"The ghost isn't supposed to walk until tomorrow night," Old Giddy wheezed, as he manoeuvered his 400-pound bulk into the horse-drawn carriage that would take the four of them along the winding road to the House of the Shrill Whispers. "He really is an anti-social ghost if he walks a night early. I'm thinking a human killer is our real quarry, Answorth."

"Aye, and the house is full of candidates, sir. Mr. Franklin, Miss Jessica, and Mr. Cavendish, as foul a lot of relations as so fine a man could ever have. But none of them for all their evil impulses has the ability to walk through walls or fly or become invisible."

"But they could grip a duelling pistol," reasoned Old Giddy. "A ghost could not. Ghosts can go through walls all day and all night, but they cannot pick up a gun and fire it."

"You've forgotten something, Answorth," Nancy revealed in a faint whisper.

"Have I, Miss?"

"Yes. Ever since the days of Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby, who haunts the House of the Shrill Whispers because he is searching for the ghost of his lady-love who died there July 11, 1870, the inhabitants of the house have used a special calendar. The Admiral had a three-century supply made, so that the date of his love's death would be blotted from the Cogsby calendar forever."

"You're right, Miss!" the old retainer rasped. "She's right, Mr. Giddy. All our calendars have no July 11 and two July 12's. At

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the House of the Shrill Whispers it is now July 12!"

"You mean," Millard interrogated, "that the ghost has a choice of two nights to walk, in case the atmospheric conditions are not right the first night?"

"Joke if you will," the old servant bristled. "But the ghost, who has already walked once, may this year, having tasted blood, walk twice."

With that Answorth mounted the coach, took the reins in his gnarled hands, and began the journey to the House of the Shrill Whispers.

Millard and Old Giddy had an immediate look at the murder scene. Sure enough, the old man had been shot and the gun was gone. The spotlights were all in working order, and the triple-locks and triple-bolts were all untampered with and for all the world impregnable. The whole scene was impossibly baffling.

"Now you go see the family, young fellow," Old Giddy insisted. "Old Giddy wants to have a closer look at the murder scene."

"May I be of no help?"

"No, no, you just run along and comfort your young lady. Old Giddy'll save the day."

Reluctantly, Millard left the guest cottage and returned to the main house, making another set of tracks in the artificial snow. By now there were fifteen distinct sets of tracks going to the door of the guest cottage and returning, but at the time the crime was discovered there had been none—only those of the servant Answorth, who had discovered the body.

As he walked across the snow, Millard heard a curious sound emanating from the guest cottage. A hammering sound. Could Old Giddy be building something?

Entering the main house, Millard greeted Nancy. She noticed at once his pale face. "Have you seen the ghost?" she demanded.

"No," he rejoined. "Have you?"

"No, but you look white as a sheet. Is Old Giddy investigating?"

"Yes," Millard confirmed, a far-away look in his eye. "But I think I'll do some investigating of my own and try to help Old Giddy out. Do you know the phone number of the Louisiana offices of the British Rail?"

The Pinkerton investigator rubbed his jaw ponderously. "No, Mr. Carstairs. No one entered or left the cottage but the servant.

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ınd every time he'd given the old man his food and mail, we'd mooth out the artificial snow so we'd be sure to notice if any ıore footprints appeared in it."

"Did the old retainer ever have anything unusual with him?" fillard probed.

"Oh, frog's legs, mock turtle soup, cucumber-and-onion ice ream, pickled octopus tentacles, rattlesnake pot-pie—"

"Besides the food, I mean," Millard interrupted.

"No, not that I can—oh, there was his pet elephant."

"Pet elephant!" Millard started.

"Yeah, the last time the old servant brought the food, he also ad Sir Margrove Clifton's pet elephant with him on a leash. He aid the animal was lonesome and wanted to visit his master."

"Was it a big elephant?"

"No, no. Just a baby. Maybe a five-hundred pounder."

"And did the elephant come out when Answorth did?"

"Now that you mention it, no. I should have noticed that. The lephant stayed in there with Mr. Clifton."

"Yet no elephant was found when you broke into the cottage?"

"No, that's right. Gee whiz, now we got a vanished elephant on ur hands on top of everything else."

Millard did not seem disturbed. "Do you think I could have ınother look at the murder scene?"

"Sure I guess so. Old Giddy's through in there."

Within moments, Millard found what he was looking for. Under ı rug in the cottage was a trap door that had been recently nailed lown. Working quickly, he managed to pry it open and dropped lown into a tunnel below the cottage.

Turning on his flashlight, he followed the tunnel in the direc- ion of the main house. Halfway there he found what he had ex- ıected: a discarded elephant suit. Leaving this important but un- vieldy piece of evidence behind, he hurried on to whatever ıwaited him at the end of the tunnel. Speed was essential, for Millard knew he could easily be too late.

Not bothering to look for a secret panel or a concealed button, Millard crashed through the last barrier like a hero from a Dime Novel of his post-Victorian youth.

As he rather expected, he was in the servant's quarters. He had ıverturned a bookcase in Answorth's tiny room, and that elderly ervant, gasping and shocked but fortunately still alive, was lying ın the floor in a heap of volumes by such authors as Jacques

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Futrelle, Thomas W. Hanshew, Carolyn Wells, and Fergus Hume.

"Thank God he hasn't gotten to you yet, Answorth!" Millard en thused triumphantly. "You're bound to be the next victim. Yo know entirely too much!"

"I don't understand. About what?"

"Old Giddy had been here before we arrived with him tonight had he not?"

Answorth was silent.

"I know he made you promise not to tell, to pretend you hadn' seen him before if he arrived a second time. But you must tell m to save your life. He was here, wasn't he?"

"Yes," the old retainer croaked.

"And he visited your master, Margrove Clifton, disguised as a elephant, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir. He didn't want Mr. Billy or Mr. Cavendish or Mis Jessica or Mr. Franklin to know he was here then, you see."

"And he never came out?"

"No, sir. He was going to stay there to protect Mr. Clifton."

"The heck he was!" Millard remonstrated.

"Believe it or not, son, that was the original plan," said a nev voice. A four-hundred-pound spectre had appeared in the doorway an antique duelling pistol in his hand. "But I was kind of desper ate, don't you see? Desperate for the kind of locked-room problen that made me famous. When I found that he had a trap door i the guest cottage, a bloomin' tunnel that led from there to th main house, I knew exactly what the critics—and I have my crit ics, son—would say: that gimmick is a cheat. Secret passages an tunnels go back to Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole and Monl Lewis, and in a modern detective story—and this is a modern de tective story, son, whatever you may think—such outworn device are against the rules.

"So I was infuriated at him for invitin' me here to the House o the Shrill Whispers, on false pretences as it were. So I took ou my pistol and shot him dead, planning to escape through the tun nel here and later go back and nail down the trap door, mean while tryin' to come up with some other explanation for th murder in the triple-locked cottage."

"And thus blame an innocent person for the crime!"

"No, son, not really. I just wanted to safeguard my reputation. don't even mind bein' the murderer really, but havin' the gim mick turn out to be a secret passage! That was positively out."

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The eyes behind the two monocles looked genuinely sad. "Of course, I knew Answorth would have to die, because he knew I was there in the first place, in the elephant suit, and he knew about the tunnel. But I didn't count on havin' to kill you, too, son. It goes down hard, but hang it, it does go down. Before I shoot you, though, son, I think it only fair that you explain how you got on to me, how you figured it all out."

"Easy, Old Giddy. It was when you mentioned that the victim had been killed by a duelling pistol before Answorth even told us what the weapon was. Then, when I heard you hammering behind the locked door, I guessed that you were trying to cover up your tracks somehow. I called British Rail, and they told me all the times for the trains that stop at the Warwick-on-Stems station. There are only two a day, the one we arrived on and the earlier one that you arrived on in the first place.

"But a handcar was stolen from the Warwick-on-Stems station early to-day, and it was found off the track in the bushes near the place where you first appeared on our train. It must have been a very athletic performance on your part, Old Giddy, leaping onto a moving train, especially for a man who is so bulky as to get stuck between cars. But your reputation was at stake, Old Giddy, and so you were able to perform far beyond your normal strength."

The murderer smiled benignly. "Say, old son, I did do a right fine job of it, didn't I? In fact, what I did was more impossible than any impossible crime I ever investigated, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Old Giddy, Nick Carter couldn't have done better."

Old Giddy twirled the duelling pistol and returned it to its holster. "Son, I ain't gonna kill you after all. No, I'm givin' myself up. There ain't a jail in Louisiana that can hold Sir Gideon Merrimac. I hope you and Miss Nancy are happy with your money."

"You're a good sport, Old Giddy. But it's her money, and I won't live off my wife."

"Did you say wife?" enquired a new voice. Nancy had appeared in the doorway. "It's premature, isn't it, Millard? The crime isn't solved yet, and the suspects are waiting downstairs for you to question them, Old Giddy."

"The crime has been solved, Miss," Old Giddy said dolefully.

"But the ghost of Admiral Cogsby hasn't walked yet."

"Ghost!" roared Old Giddy. "Ghost!" he bellowed with a laugh that reverberated through the House of the Shrill Whispers. "The way my luck's runnin', it'll be a real ghost!"

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Celia Fremlin

Golden Tuesday

William was "a wonderful husband" and he had "the patience of a saint." He was the stuff of which martyrs are made. At least, that's what the neighbors were beginning to say and think . . .

A distinguished story with the "luminous quality" that so many of Celia Fremlin's stories have . . .

The tiny moment of suspense, the passing flicker of dread lest, this time, Coral would not be waiting for him at their usual table—this was all part of William's Tuesday happiness, and he wouldn't have missed it for anything. He paused in the doorway of the discotheque, savoring these moments of delicious terror (delicious because unfounded) while the pop music that Coral loved streamed out past him into the winter night, and his eyes searched the rosy dimness inside for a gleam of cool blonde hair, for a glimpse of pouting, impatient lips, fashionably metallic, and drawing, restless with waiting, on yet another cigarette.

As he stood there, bathed in the drumbeat rhythm, and with the pale glittering young people surging past him out of the night, William didn't feel 48. He didn't feel married; and least of all did he feel like the saintly, devoted paragon of a husband that his wife's illness had forced him into becoming.

Yes, forced. All through the years when Eleanor had been well and strong and like anyone else's wife, William had been like anyone else's husband—cheerfully selfish, casually loving, and full of complaints, as are a man's rights.

But Eleanor's illness had finished all that. It had silenced his complaints, pole-axed his selfishness. All that was left was the loving—casual no longer, but nursed and coddled like an overfed cat, bloated with pity and good intentions.

"What a wonderful husband!" the neighbors were beginning to say of him. "Whatever would she do without him?" "The patience of an angel," they were saying. "Never a cross word, even now

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that she's grown so trying, poor thing!"

Actually he had been hustled into being wonderful, inch by inch, and fighting all the way. Slowly, inexorably, Eleanor's aching back, her worsening stomach pains, had forced him back and back, blocking first one exit and then another, until at last here he was, like a man trapped by the advancing tide, finally and irrevocably at the mercy of her encroaching illness.

By attacks of nausea, by bouts of uncontrollable shivering, her sickness had got him into its power; bit by bit, day after day, it had molded him, twisting and transforming his commonplace flesh into an angel substance, the stuff of which martyrs are made. He had accepted his role of martyr because he could not fight it; he nursed Eleanor with tenderness and devotion because these seemed to be the only tools left to him; and his reward for all this was a monstrous, ever-increasing tedium, as Eleanor grew more and more boring, lapsed more and more into pain . . .

Someone had put on another record. It roared out from the russet darkness of the discotheque like a trumpet call to Youth, and William's nostrils quivered at the summons like those of an old warhorse. Youth, youth! His 48 years seemed to slide away into the night, and so did all thought of his dreary middle-aged wife, hollowed out by her dreary middle-aged operations.

He was free, free of it all, for one golden evening! Free like these bearded striplings, like these dozy half-grown girls, delicious in their ignorance of pain! Free! Free! His magic Tuesday evening had begun!

William pushed open the swinging door and marched, head held high, into the very shrine of youth, marched tall and proud because he had a girl in there of his very own. A girl as gloriously young as the rest, and as delectable, and waiting for *him*.

"Willy! *There* you are! I was beginning to think something had happened! I was afraid you'd had to stay with *her!* Oh, Willy, *darling!*"

She always welcomed him with these exclamations, reaching out her silver-tipped little fingers to draw him down beside her, into the place she had been guarding for him on the red plastic cushions. He loved the feel of her soft hands not yet touched by work; and he loved too her never-failing surprise, Tuesday after Tuesday, at his successful arrival at the rendezvous. The predictability of her every word and gesture was infinitely soothing to him; it gave to these Tuesday evenings a luminous quality, the

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precious minutes sliding through his fingers like a necklace of well-loved jewels. He knew already what her next words were going to be, and how he was going to answer them; he waited, joyously expectant as a child awaiting his familiar bedtime story.

"Is *she* any better?"

Coral's voice held just the note of anxious melancholy that is appropriate for asking about a hopeless invalid; but behind the sweet concern in her gray eyes William could see dancing an eagerness for morbid details that exactly matched his own aching need to confide them. Coral loved to hear of Eleanor's petulance, her sickroom fads and fancies, her endless aches and pains—loved to hear of them every bit as much as William longed to tell of them. It made them both feel so *healthy*, he and Coral, so vital, so united in the singular glory of not being ill!

And so William shook his head sadly, as he always did in answer to Coral's inquiry; he looked into her sparkling, expectant eyes, and to keep that enchanting eagerness dancing for him he raked his wearied memories for the things she most loved to hear.

She loved to hear that Eleanor had refused to take her medicine again, that she had scolded William for not responding quickly enough to her night bell, endlessly dragging him from sleep. She loved to hear that Eleanor had asked him, perhaps, for dry toast, or a glass of orange juice, and then, when he brought it to her, all daintily set out on a pretty lace cloth, had turned her face away in disgust, refusing to eat.

"Oh, dear!" Coral would say, licking her little silver lips. "Oh, dear, I *am* sorry! But the pain's better, is it—the pain in her back?"

Coral loved to hear about the pain in Eleanor's back; it made her own spine feel so straight and strong and youthful. She gave a lissome little shrug with it now, while she breathed her condolences, and William watched the small movement with delight. He leaned forward and kissed the smooth unlined cheek under the fall of gleaming hair.

"How marvelous it is to touch a woman who is *well!*" he murmured; and Coral glowed, and flaunted her well-ness before him for just the right length of time before gently prompting him—for after all, their time was short.

"She's not *worse*, though, is she?" she suggested, laying her little hand on William's with sweet concern. "The doctor doesn't think she's *worse?*"

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The sweet secret zest in the young voice was to William like the forked flame of desire itself, and he responded to it like a lizard to the sun, his mind coming alive, darting this way and that among the sordid sickroom trivia for the kind of nourishment on which his and Coral's relationship flourished and grew fat.

"Not *worse*—not really," he said, with studied fairness, and whetting Coral's appetite by the tiny delay. "But it's the sickness, you see, she can't seem to keep anything down. No matter how carefully I prepare it."

Coral's silvery, knowledgeable voice broke in, right on cue.

"You know why that is, Willy, don't you? You do realize why she is doing it? Unconsciously, of course—I don't mean she'd *deliberately* do such a thing to you—but *unconsciously* she's equating food with love. By rejecting the food you offer her she's rejecting your love. Rejecting it out of jealousy, because she can't bear not to have all of it, every minute of the day. Her demands on your love have gone beyond all reason, my poor darling."

Sweet Coral! She never failed him, never! Aloud he said, "Oh, Coral, how wonderful it is to be with someone who *understands!* I couldn't talk about this to anyone else in the whole wide world, because it seems such a dreadful thing to say of one's own wife. But I *have* wondered myself, sometimes, if it isn't psychosomatic, some of it."

How the silver earrings bobbed and danced, in a sort of ecstasy of understanding!

"Yes," Coral murmured. "Yes, that's what I mean. Poor Eleanor. I'm sure she doesn't realize it herself, but after all, an illness *is* a way of keeping a husband at home, isn't it, when a woman hasn't—well, hasn't much else to hold him with, to make him want to stay with her."

She sipped her coffee delicately, watching him over the rim of the cup with gray, thoughtful eyes. The most wonderful part of the whole evening was just beginning, the moment they got to Eleanor's unconscious motivations. Like gods they soared together over the sick woman's disintegrating personality, pouncing on a complex here, a neurosis there, handing them back and forth to each other like jewels, with little cries of admiration.

"Of course, looking back, I can see that she always had these incipient hypochondriac tendencies . . ."

"She can't *help* it, of course, it's no use *blaming* her . . ."

"Lying in bed all day—it's no wonder her back hurts her."

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"And it's not as if the doctor wasn't giving her plenty of pain killers . . ."

"You know, I've sometimes wondered if that pain of hers is really as bad as she fancies it is? I once read an article which said that jealousy, especially sexual jealousy . . ."

"And all that throwing up in the night—unconscious demand for attention . . ."

"Because she can't bear her husband to escape from her, even into sleep . . ."

The coffee in the two cups cooled in front of them as they talked. They needed no stimulant, for the thought of Eleanor, ugly and repellent on her bed of sickness, filled them with such a sense of their own health that it was like wine; it was like immortality itself.

But all too soon it was over. At eleven o'clock William must be home again, his weekly respite at an end. And only then did they look away from each other, a sort of shyness rising between them.

"If only—" began William, and stopped; and at the same time Coral murmured, "How long—" and checked herself. They moved out of the discotheque in silence, for they could not trust themselves to say another word.

When William got home he found that Eleanor had been sick again. As happened more and more frequently now, she had failed to get her head properly over the enamel bowl at her bedside; and as William, teeth clenched in a ghastly smile, set himself to his disgusting task, it suddenly flashed through his mind: This could be the last time; I don't *have* to go on like this.

And that night, as he tipped the allotted two sleeping pills into his wife's bony outstretched palm, the bottle shook and shuddered in his hand, and he felt the sweat springing out on his forehead, so that he had to turn his face away.

The impulse subsided almost as suddenly as it had assailed him; but it had left its mark, and during the ensuing week it would not leave him alone.

It would be so easy! Several times, as the days went by, he looked at the bottle as it stood on the bathroom shelf and had fantasies of mashing the pills and stirring the powder, all of it, into his wife's nighttime cup of gruel. He had visions of rushing into the discotheque next Tuesday, crying, "She's dead! She's dead!" and flinging himself into Coral's arms, and both of them sobbing for joy.

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But he knew, really, that it was only a vision. One night he tipped a whole lot of the pills into the palm of his hand, handled them, and knew, for certain, that he would not dare. Why, the very feel of them on his bare skin set his heart pounding, and dizziness so blurred his vision that he could scarcely get the pills back into the bottle. Two—three—several of them went pitter-patter across the floor, and as he bent to retrieve them he felt the breath choking his lungs, and his heart thudded as if it would burst through his ribs.

No, he, William, was not the sort of which murderers are made. He was the sort who would suffer, who would let Coral suffer. The weeks, the months, the years would go by, their love would wither, and still Eleanor would live on . . .

"William! William!"

The weak yet urgent voice twanged against his nerves, and he gave a guilty start.

"William, where are my pills?" the voice demanded, peevish and despairing. "Why are you being so long?"

Hastily, hands still trembling, he stuffed the last few pills back into the bottle.

"Coming, dear, coming," he called, and hurried into his wife's room. He looked into the gray sunken face in which no spark of beauty or gaiety was left; he looked at the sticklike arms that once, in their bloom, had held him close.

"If only I had the courage!" he thought.

But he reckoned without Eleanor's courage. The next morning, the Tuesday morning, the bottle of pills was empty, and Eleanor was dead. Dead on a Tuesday, dead on his glorious day. Had she known? And had she, knowing, chosen this day on which to release him?

He did not call the doctor, or indeed call anyone.

"Coral!" he kept repeating to himself. "When I see Coral . . ." And he sat all day in the silent house, waiting for the relief and the joy to wash over him, waiting for the moment when he would rush through the crowded discotheque crying, just as he had in his dreams, "She's dead! She's dead!"

The discotheque was more crowded and noisier than ever, and at first Coral did not hear what he was saying.

"She's *what?*" she asked as he leaned forward to repeat the news.

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"She—she's—" He stopped, and he knew in that instant that he could never tell her.

For where now would be that sense of united well-being, that glorious sense of their joint health in contrast to Eleanor's sickness? What would they talk about, he and Coral, now that Eleanor's symptoms, her complaints, and her unreasonableness were gone?

Where would be Coral's marvelous sympathy and understanding now that Eleanor had escaped them forever, had moved on into a realm where the barbed insights of pop psychology could not follow her? What *was* Coral, anyway, now that she was no longer a bulwark against his dying wife?

William stared across the table at the empty-faced little blonde, who was waiting so impatiently for him to speak.

"She's—she's worse."

"Oh, my poor Willy! She kept you up again last night, did she? Oh, I can see she did, you poor darling, you look so tired! But you shouldn't give in to it. Willy, you really shouldn't. After all, *we* know, don't we, that she's not really in pain. It's only her unconscious aggression and jealousy . . ."

It was all right! It was the old Coral again, just as she had always been! Nothing had been changed, nothing spoiled. Their Tuesday conversations could go on exactly as before.

But for how long? For how long can you keep your dead wife propped against the pillows, never calling a doctor, never letting the neighbors in? He, William, too much of a coward to be a murderer, was going to be transformed, as the days went by, into a creature far, far worse than a murderer. A monster, a ghoul—the horror of it would blazon across the front page of every Sunday paper—and all because he didn't dare do *anything*.

He wondered, dreamily whether any others of the ghouls and monsters of the world had attained their awful status in this way? By just doing nothing.

"Q"

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William Brittain

Wynken, Blynken, and Nod

Three men in an open boat—lost in the Indian Ocean off the western coast of Australia—no drinking water—only a little food—and three killers of the deep their constant company, circling, circling . . .

Here is a contemporary variation of the "end game" that was invented and named by Wilkie Collins more than a century ago. (Clue: the first American appearance of Wilkie Collins' original version was in the April 1858 issue of "The Atlantic Monthly.")

Dabney, the little pilot, swam back to consciousness, and the heat struck him like a sledge hammer. He tried to raise his right hand to shield his eyes from the blast-furnace rays of the sun, and the pain that shot along his forearm almost made him pass out again.

"Take it easy, man." Dabney recognized the deep rich voice of Croft, the gigantic black man who was built like a prizefighter but who was a student of oceanography. "Don't try to move around. Maybe this will help."

A handkerchief soaked in water was draped over Dabney's face. The little pilot sucked greedily at the cool liquid and then tried to spit it out. It was salty. At the same time he became aware that the surface on which he was lying was slowly undulating beneath him.

Gingerly Dabney propped himself up on his left elbow, feeling the dull ache in his head and the sharper pain in his right arm. He was thankful that at least one of his passengers was safe—for the present, anyway. But the other?

"Tiedeman?" he asked in a whisper. "What about Tiedeman?"

"I'm here. Wherever here is." The voice of Tiedeman, the mining engineer, was whining and querulous. " 'The trip from Port Hedland to Broome will be a piece of cake'—that's what you said. I should have known better than to try and ride to such a God-

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forsaken part of Australia in that broken-down plane of yours. Of all the stupid—"

"I wouldn't carry on so, Tiedeman," Croft said, his voice quietly ominous. "Those tropic storms can come up awful fast. Dabney had no way of knowing about it when he took off."

The trip from Port Hedland, on the west coast of Australia, to Broome, less than 300 miles north, usually held no particular dangers. Dabney, who ran his own small charter plane service "on tuppence and adhesive plaster," had made the flight dozens of times. But this trip he'd made the error of trying to save both time and expensive petrol by flying over the ocean rather than taking the longer but safer route which followed the coastline.

The storm, striking with sudden fury, had shaken the tiny twin-engined plane the way a terrier shakes a rat. Heaven only knew how far off course they'd been blown. The last thing Dabney recalled was looking through the windscreen toward the billowing water below. He'd shouted to the others to break out the survival supplies and the inflatable raft. There'd been a crunching sound as a structural member of the plane was torn loose, and then—

"You struck your head on the instrument panel when we hit," Croft said, "and a piece of glass cut a gash in your forearm. We were lucky, though. I managed to get out the first-aid kit and I bandaged the gash as tight as I could. It really should have stitches, but I think it'll be all right until we can get you to a doctor."

"And the food," murmured Dabney. "What about the food?"

"I got the crate out just before the plane sank," Tiedeman replied. "There's not very much, though, if it's got to be split three ways."

Dabney managed a weak smile. They weren't so bad off then. With the small crate of tinned meats, fruits, and vegetables there'd be enough for at least a few days if they went on short rations. And the juice in which the fruits and vegetables were packed would furnish a little liquid for their already parched bodies. Now if only the ruddy raft would hold together and not spring a leak.

The raft resembled a misshapen yellow doughnut, if one could imagine a doughnut six feet wide and almost fourteen feet long. A nylon rope, held in place by grommets, went around the entire outer circumference. The flooring of the raft was nothing more than a single layer of rubberized canvas through which every

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movement of the water could be felt.

At one end of the raft hung the small metal tank which had contained the compressed CO_2 with which the outer rim was now filled. The gas, in its rubberized skin, was the only thing which kept them afloat. A single careless movement, a slash of a sharp bit of metal or a puncture by some pointed object, and they would all be floundering in the tepid waters of the Indian Ocean with no land in sight.

The sun settled slowly into the horizon, casting fantastic splashes of color against the sky. "At least we'll be able to use the sun for directions tomorrow," Croft said thoughtfully. "If we row far enough east we ought to hit the coast of Australia somewhere."

"Unless we got blown farther than we thought," Tiedeman growled. "For all we know we could be nearer to Indonesia than Australia."

"I doubt that," Croft said, "The storm didn't last long enough to blow us that far. Besides, the wind was coming from almost due east. If anything we've just been blown a few miles farther out to sea. We'll break out the oars and start rowing at sunup."

"Well, what about some food, then?" Tiedeman asked. "When's supper?"

"Supper's first thing in the morning," Croft snapped. "We've only got a little food, and it may have to last us a long time."

"But I'm hungry. Besides, who put you in charge of that crate?"

"There's only one way you can get to this crate of food," Croft said in a flat voice, "and that's to come down to this end of the raft and take it away from me."

Tiedeman grumbled but made no move to approach the heavily muscled Croft. Dabney smiled. They were going to make it, he was sure of that. He didn't trust Tiedeman as far as he could throw Buckingham Palace, but with Croft taking charge, everything was going to be fine. Just fine.

It was three hours before dawn when the sharks came.

Overnight the ocean had become glassy smooth as if to atone for the storm of the previous day. While the sun was burning off the early morning haze, Craft saw the first ripples: a dorsal fin, gray-brown and tipped with white, cut the water about 20 yards away like some demoniac broadsword; then off to the right a second fin broke the surface, and with a slight splash a third appeared behind the second.

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"We've got company," Croft said to Tiedeman, nodding toward the largest of the fins.

"Sharks!" Tiedeman's voice rasped in his throat, and Croft caught the edge of panic in it. "Do you think they—I mean, this raft isn't very strong."

Croft shook his head. "I doubt they'll attack. The bottom of the raft looks like just a lump in the water to them, Not very appetizing."

"Sharks are sharks," Tiedeman said, "and they eat people. But maybe they haven't spotted us. Maybe they'll go away."

"Oh, they've seen us, all right. Look, they're circling the raft."

Around and around moved the fins in a counterclockwise direction, making no attempt to come nearer.

"You'd better wake Dabney and tell him about the sharks," Croft said. "I don't think we're in any immediate danger, but I don't want anybody dragging an arm or a leg in the water or throwing anything over the side that might attract them."

Tiedeman shook Dabney awake. The pilot's arm was thickly swollen and of a fiery red color from hand to elbow. He groaned with pain and gritted his teeth as he shifted his weight.

Without a word Tiedeman pointed toward the nearest of the gliding fins.

Dabney nodded. "I expected the ruddy blighters would 'ang about when I seen 'em come by last night."

"Last night? But how—"

"The waters of this 'ere ocean ofttimes glows when there's somethin' movin' down there," said Dabney. "Mr. Croft probably has some explanation for it, but all I know is, it happens." The pilot's eyes seemed to glitter brightly, and Tiedeman didn't like the way the man was staring at him. He pressed his palm to Dabney's brow. It was dry and burning with fever.

"I couldn't sleep last night, with me arm and all, so I was lookin' over the side. Saw a school of little fishies about ten feet down. The three sharks was cuttin' through them time after time, gettin' a mouthful of fish dinner with every pass. I must 'ave watched 'em for an hour or so before I dozed off again."

Dabney collapsed into the bottom of the raft, breathing heavily. "Wynken," he said, gasping, "Blynken, and Nod."

"What are you talking about, Dabney? I can't understand you."

"Wynken, Blynken, and Nod," the pilot repeated. "That's the names I gave to the sharks. Oh, don't laugh at me. It's from an

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old nursery rhyme me poor dear Mum used to tell me."

"Croft!" Tiedeman called. "Come and have a look at Dabney. I think he's off his head."

The huge black man slid over beside Dabney, who was still mumbling in a soft voice:

" 'We have come to fish for the herring fish
That live in this beautiful sea;
Nets of silver and gold have we!'
Said Wynken, Blynken, and Nod."

"Look at the way his flesh is swollen around that bandage you put on him," Tiedeman said. "Don't you think you'd better loosen it?"

"I don't dare," Croft replied. "If that cut of his begins bleeding again, we might never get it stopped. We'll try keeping his clothes soaked in sea water. That may bring down the fever. Use his hat to dip with, but don't make too much commotion. We don't want to attract those sharks any nearer than they are right now."

The simple remedy seemed to work, at least temporarily. Within half an hour Dabney, soaking wet, was complaining of hunger in a faint but coherent voice. Croft reached into the food crate and brought out three cans.

"Tomatoes, peaches, and"—he chuckled softly—"and cocktail sausages." Croft turned to the pilot, smiling. "What were you going to do, Dabney?" he asked. "Have a little party when your plane went down?"

"You can give me the bloody bangers," said Dabney, rolling over painfully and stretching out his left hand. "You and Tiedeman take the tomatoes and peaches."

Tiedeman reached greedily for the can of peaches, but Croft jerked it away from him. "None of that," he said. "The fruits and vegetables will have more juice in them than the meat, and we'll be needing all the liquids we can get. It'll be share and share alike."

He gave a sudden grunt of amazement and held up one of the cans, looking at it thoughtfully. "I don't suppose you thought about how we were going to open these cans, Dabney?"

"No, I—Coo! That's a rum go now, ain't it? It never occurred to me to bring somethin' to—"

Tiedeman reached into a pocket and brought out a small red object. "Swiss army knife," he explained. "It's got everything in it you'd want. Blade, scissors, awl, can opener—"

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"Saved again," Dabney murmured. "Just let Tiedeman find the right gadget, and Bob's-your-uncle."

Croft handed Tiedeman the three cans, and the engineer began prying at the top of one of them. "Chop everything up fine and mix it all together," Croft ordered. "We'll split it three ways. And when you're finished don't throw the empty cans overboard. We may need them to catch rain in—if it rains."

When they had finished eating, Croft assembled the collapsible aluminum oars attached to the raft and inserted them through the oarlocks. Slowly he began rowing away from the rising sun. "Keep an eye on those sharks," he told Tiedeman. "Let me know if any break the circle. The flashing of the oars might attract them."

Tiedeman observed the sharks for several minutes. "They aren't coming any closer, but they aren't going away, either."

"Me, I'm gettin' used to havin' 'em around," Dabney said. "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod—they make a bloke feel he's got company out here."

"How do you tell them apart?" Croft asked, trying to hide his concern for the pilot's sanity.

"It ain't hard. Two of them fins is about the same size, right? Well, them's Wynken and Blynken. Blynken's got a notch cut out of the tip of his fin, so he must've been in a fight of some kind. And Nod's fin is a good deal bigger than the other two."

Again Tiedeman considered the fins. "You know, Dabney's right," he finally said to Croft. "You can tell them apart." He pointed astern. "That would be Nod—the one with the biggest fin, and—Croft! It's heading for the raft!"

Croft saw the flat side of the dorsal fin become a thin line protruding above the surface as the shark headed directly toward them. With a single swift movement he shifted the oars inboard. He was about to shout a warning to leap clear of the raft when the fin angled a few degrees to one side.

The two men watched as the huge fish passed by, almost within touching distance. The eyes in its large round head were cold and deadly, and the enormous pectoral fins, tipped with white, spread like wings from its body. At the side of the head, just behind the gill slits, a remora had fastened its sucker to the shark's skin, and several striped pilotfish swam just ahead of the cruelly grinning mouth. The monster tail, a wicked scythe of skin and cartilage, swept slowly from side to side, propelling the

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streamlined, twelve-foot body swiftly through the water. It passed the raft, made a wide turn, and resumed its place, circling again.

"I—I've never seen any fish that big," Tiedeman whispered.

"It's a whitetip," Croft said, "and one of the bigger ones. *Carcharhinus longimanus* is the Latin name—the one Jacques Cousteau calls 'Lord of the Long Arms' because of those big pectoral fins."

"If it goes for the raft we won't have a chance."

"It was probably just on a tour of inspection. But we're lucky there are a lot of smaller fish in these waters. I doubt that the sharks will attack us unless they get hungry—or unless they're provoked."

"Provoked?"

"Yeah. Irregular splashing will usually bring them running—the shark think it's a wounded fish. You'll notice I've been pulling on the oars with a slow steady stroke. I'd suggest you do the same when it's your turn to row. And keep your arms and legs out of the water. They'd look like small fish following us—just the thing for a quick snack."

"Don't worry," Tiedeman said, his face pale. "I want to keep just as far from those things as I can. Anything else I should know?"

"Well, blood in the water will attract them from a long way off. So be careful with that knife of yours and don't—"

"Wynken, Blynken, and Nod, one night, sailed off—sailed off—" Dabney suddenly sat bolt upright in the rear of the raft, staring vacantly out to sea. His mumbling trailed away as he turned toward Croft and Tiedeman, an idiot's grin on his face.

"He's delirous again," Croft said as the pilot, his strength exhausted, dropped into the bottom of the raft. "I wish I knew what to do for him. That arm looks worse every hour."

"Croft?" Tiedeman's voice became low. "About Dabney. You know, don't you, that there are only six cans of food left."

"So? What's that got to do with Dabney?"

"We might be out here for days, even for weeks. It's impossible for us to do any fishing with those sharks around, and I don't see any sign of rain clouds."

"Oh, I think we'll come out of this all right. There'll be planes looking for us. In fact, they're probably in the air right now. After all, Dabney filed a flight plan to Broome."

"But they won't know where to look. That storm could have blown us anywhere."

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"What's all this got to do with Dabney?"

"He can't take his turn at the oars, can he? He's too helpless to do anything. Besides, that arm of his looks gangrenous already. He'll be certain to die in a day or two, no matter what we do. So I just thought we might—"

"What are you suggesting, Tiedeman?" Croft demanded. "Throw him to the sharks or just let him starve to death? Or maybe you'd like to practise a little discreet cannibalism. Just what, exactly, did you have in mind?"

"Dammit, I just thought the wisest thing would be to—"

"To murder him, Tiedeman? That's what you're talking about, isn't it? Well, I'm not having any. Dabney will get his regular share of the rations as long as they hold out. After that we'll try to figure out some other way of getting food and water."

"And who put you in charge, black boy?" Tiedeman snarled. "What gives you the right to make all the decisions around here?"

Croft bowed his head and then raised it slowly. "I should kill you for what you just said," he murmured slowly, "but that would make me as bad as you. And as for my right to be in charge, it's a simple matter of physical strength. I could break you in two any time I felt like it. And if you try anything with Dabney I might do just that. Now take the oars. I need some rest."

Late that afternoon the plane came over. Tiedeman was the first to hear the drone of the motors and he shouted to Croft, who was attending to Dabney.

"Wave something!" Croft yelled. "Use your shirt. Try to attract their attention."

The small plane was flying about a hundred yards above the water, perhaps a half mile away. The two men shouted hoarsely and waved scraps of cloth. The sound of the plane's motors became louder and louder. Then they began to fade away as, without changing speed or direction, it headed toward the distant horizon.

Tiedeman, tired by his efforts, slumped into the bottom of the raft. "They didn't see us," he croaked. "They didn't see us. I—I've got to have water, Croft." He looked longingly into the sea.

"Don't try it, Tiedeman," Croft warned. "You know what salt water can do to you."

"How about opening a can?" asked the engineer. "Just one."

"Not until tomorrow. And if we cut down to two cans of food for the three of us we can make them last an extra day."

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The food allowance cut by one-third! Tiedeman looked hatefully at the unconscious form of Dabney.

The sun was still above the horizon when Croft, exhausted by the rowing and the lack of food and water, turned the oars over to Tiedeman and moved to the front of the raft. Curling his huge body into a ball he fell asleep almost immediately.

Less than an hour later he was awakened by a shouting. He opened his eyes, straightened his aching body, and looked about. Tiedeman had apparently fallen asleep over the oars. That was all right. The sun had nearly set and it would be impossible to find directions in the dark. The shout must have come from Dabney.

But Dabney was not in the raft!

Croft heard a thrashing in the water off to his left. He turned. The little pilot was in the water about 50 feet away, shouting gibberish and flailing his arms to keep his head above the surface. Croft also saw that the three sharks had broken their ring around the raft and had formed a smaller circle around Dabney.

Frantically Croft looked for a piece of rope or something to throw to the man in the water. Finding nothing, he pushed Tiedeman to one side and grasped the oars. Even as he did this, Blynken's notched fin disappeared from view. There was a sudden shrill scream from Dabney as the shark struck him somewhere below the surface. The last thing Croft saw was the man's arms, upraised as if pleading for mercy, before he was savagely yanked down into the sea.

The sharks seemed to go mad. They raced through the water like silver torpedoes, biting at the thing that had once been Dabney, as well as at each other. Once Croft felt the bump of a huge body striking the raft from underneath, and he rowed hard to move away from the area where the sharks were finishing their grisly meal. Then, overcome by shock, hunger, and thirst, he buried his head in his hands and sobbed loudly.

The following morning Croft and Tiedeman shared a can of tomatoes. Croft ate first, emptying the can of half its contents, and then handed the rest to Tiedeman, who sucked greedily at the juicy redness. All too soon they were finished, and there was nothing to do for the rest of the day except to keep rowing and watching the incessant circling of the sharks.

"Croft," Tiedeman moaned, "now that Dabney's gone, couldn't we open another can? There'll be more for each of us now."

"I'll think about it," Croft replied. "Maybe tonight." He looked

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steadily at his companion. "What happened to Dabney, Tiedeman?" he asked suddenly.

"I dunno. I was asleep, same as you. In fact, it wasn't until you shoved me that I woke up. I'd imagine, though, that the fever finally got to him and he started wriggling around. Being out of his head he fell out of the raft—the sides aren't very high. By the time he realized where he was—in the water—it was too late."

"Or maybe he had some help getting into the water," Croft said grimly. "I haven't forgotten the way you were talking yesterday."

"Hey, wait a minute. Do you think I'd—"

"I think you'd do anything to get another can of that food back there." Croft pointed to the crate in the rear of the raft. "And there was something about Dabney—just before he went under. Something odd. I wish I could remember what it was."

"Look, maybe I was a little crazy myself yesterday. But I wouldn't push anybody to those sharks. What do you think I am, Croft?"

"What I think you are and what I can prove are two different things," was the reply. "But okay, it could have happened by accident, I suppose. Just don't try seeing that I have an 'accident,' too, or I won't be the one who ends up in the water."

"Croft, I swear I never—"

"Save your breath. It's your turn to row."

The morning passed slowly, the two men changing off at the oars at what they judged were hourly intervals. As the sun reached its zenith Croft turned the oars over to Tiedeman and went to the rear of the raft to rest.

He tried to sleep, but the hot sun, reflecting from the water, sent flashes of light even through his closed eyelids. He kept thinking of Dabney, out there in the water, and of that awful moment when he disappeared from view. There was something wrong somewhere, but Croft couldn't put his finger on it. He shuddered, thinking of a wounded whale he'd once seen attacked by sharks in the Pacific. The sharks would streak in with open jaws and bite down on the living flesh. Then they'd jerk their tails wildly, whipping their great bodies until they'd ripped off a piece of meat the size of a basketball.

He peered over the side of the raft, trying to get his mind off the morbid memory of Dabney's death. One of the striped pilotfish had apparently abandoned its shark and adopted the raft. Only a little thicker than Croft's thumb, the pilotfish darted toward the

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stern of the raft and then away again. It continued the darting for several minutes.

Croft frowned. Odd. Usually such fish kept a regular distance from a shark or whatever they elected to accompany. But this fish looked as if it were being attracted by something. It couldn't be the oars; they were too far away. Then what—

Croft looked over the side of the raft. There it was. Something caught in the rope that ran around the raft's outer edge. A white streamer of a thing that fluttered and waved in the water. He pulled at it and brought it aboard.

He stared at the white thing draped across his hands for several seconds before the full significance of what he was holding came to him.

A mighty rage welled up in the black man, banishing all the weakness and discomfort he had experienced in the past few days. "Tiedeman!" he yelled, his voice roaring across the water. "You killed him, Tiedeman. You killed Dabney!"

Tiedeman looked up, startled. Pulling an oar free of the rowlock he held it in front of him protectively. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "It was an accident."

"It's no good," Croft said, shaking his head. "You see, I remember what was different about Dabney's appearance just as the sharks got him. He raised both arms just as he was dragged under."

"So?"

"So there was no bandage on his right arm. It was all swollen, but there was no bandage on it!"

"What does that prove? Maybe the knot came untied, or maybe it was worn through and unwound in the water."

Croft held up the white cloth in his hand. "Here's the bandage. Apparently it got caught on the rope around the raft when Dabney went over. When you pushed him."

"Look, the bandage came untied and got hooked on the rope. So what?"

"The knot's still in the bandage. See." He held the strip of cloth closer. "And the ends here—they aren't worn through. They were cut. And you're the only one in the raft with a knife."

Croft threw the bandage to the bottom of the raft and stared with open hatred at Tiedeman. "It wasn't enough just to push Dabney into the water, was it?" he snarled. "You had to cut off the bandage and start the wound bleeding again. That would be

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sure to attract the sharks, just the way I told you it would. And all for an extra can or two of food. Tiedeman, I think it's time you got a closer look yourself at Wynken, Blynken, and Nod."

Croft stood up, towering over the seated Tiedeman. He stretched out his arms. At that moment, swift as a striking snake, Tiedeman brought up the aluminum oar. It caught Croft full in the chest. The huge man stumbled backward. The edge of the raft caught his legs, and, with arms outstretched, he fell back into the water. Wynken was the first shark to leave the circle.

In the water Croft looked up at the man looming over him. Quickly he made a surface dive under the raft. Tiedeman darted glances from side to side. Croft could come up anywhere. Tiedeman had to be ready. Jamming his hand into his pocket he pulled out the Swiss army knife, and his fingers clawed at the blades. The awl was the first to pop into view.

Something bumped at the front of the raft. Tiedeman scrambled forward just as a dark hand reached over the raft's rounded side. "Tiedeman!" Croft yelled. "The sharks! They're coming. Help me! Help me!"

"I'll help you, all right." Raising the knife in his clenched fist, Tiedeman brought down the sharp point of the awl. The slender shaft of metal pierced through skin and flesh as if through butter.

The awl went completely through Croft's hand. But it did not stop there. Half an inch of it punched a neat hole in the rubberized skin of the raft. As Croft's hand slid away, still transfixed by the knife, Tiedeman heard the hissing of escaping gas and quickly pressed a finger over the hole. The hissing stopped.

Something larger and stronger than Croft struck the underside of the raft and almost upended it. Desperately Tiedeman pressed harder against the hole. Ten feet away Croft made a last effort to reach safety. One arm was raised to begin swimming.

And then a gigantic shadow appeared below the swimming man. Croft did not scream; he simply vanished. A red stain billowed out through the water as the shadowy things below fed once more.

Finally it was over. The sharks resumed their inexorable circling, and Tiedeman continued to plug the leak in the raft with his finger. Once he took his finger away for a fraction of a second and the gas rushed out, the raft becoming perceptibly softer.

As the afternoon wore on, Tiedeman looked longingly at the crate of food at the other end of the raft. There was a patch kit

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back there somewhere, too. He calculated distances. How long would it take for him to scrabble his way to the rear of the raft, get the patch kit, and bring it forward? Thirty seconds? In that time the raft would have exhausted its precious supply of gas and be completely deflated.

The food was also denied to him. Even if he had the time to reach a can, he now had no way of opening it. So he would starve—or perhaps become too weak from thirst. Even a short nap would be his last.

For the small part of his remaining life he would be condemned to sit in the blazing sun, without food or water, pressing his index finger tightly over the tiny hole.

And, still circling the raft, Wynken, Blynken, and Nod waited, waited.

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Jerrold Phaon

Hunting Season

This is the 374th "first story" published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine (at the time of this publication the number has passed 450) . . . an unusual "first story"—unusual in its quality and in its subtle, sophisticated theme .

The author, Jerrold Phaon (a pseudonym), was 23 when he submitted "Hunting Season." An English teacher in Allentown, Pa., he is a graduate of Penn State University and working on his Master's Degree. He is married, and his wife and he have two children, a girl and a boy. They live in a rural village "on the first ridge of the Pocono Mountains."

The "Phaons" are avid campers and hikers, and enjoy most winter sports. Mr. Phaon drives 50 miles a day to and from work in all weather. "It isn't a very exciting or glamorous life, but then, as I said, I like to live quietly"—and in spare time he writes stories . . . Watch this "quiet man"—he has things to say . . .

"I don't know why you even bother," Mildred McKay told her husband. "Every year it's the same thing—you drag out that damn gun and clean it at my table and get that foul-smelling mess all over."

"It's not a gun," Harry answered. "It's a rifle. A thirty-oh-six." He wiped the barrel with the polishing cloth he had been using, then lifted the rifle to his shoulder and sighted across the kitchen at his wife. "Bang! You're dead," he said.

Mildred turned around at the sink. "Don't point that gun at me," she said.

"Bang Bang Bang," he said. He laughed and lowered the rifle and cradled it in his lap. "I keep telling you, my dear. It's a rifle. *Rifle.*" He lifted his eyes from the rifle and looked at his wife. Mildred had gone back to her dishes.

"Don't make any difference to me," she said. "Guns, rifles,

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peashooters. They're *dangerous*. I don't like them in my house."

"When I was in the Marines," McKay began, "we didn't dare call our weapon a gun. For three years of the war my rifle was the best friend I had. The *only* friend I had," he added.

"You'd think that after carrying one of them things around for three years you'd of had enough to last a man a lifetime. I can't see it myself. What it is men get out of hunting."

"A man learns a lot of strange things about himself during wartime," McKay said. "He learns that man is a predatory animal. A man will kill to stay alive, but more importantly, he will kill for the pure and simple fun of it. It satisfies this primitive urge that's in every one of us. It's an instinct that is set loose in a most uninhibited manner during wartime, then has to be locked up again and kept inside our so-called civilized philosophy: namely, 'Thou shalt not kill.' It's one reason why there are so many murders following a war. And also, by the way, why so many men take up hunting. It's a way for them to vent their frustrations. A man is never freer in his soul as when he is taking a life."

"Sounds like a lot of hocus-pocus to me," Mildred McKay said. "I certainly hope you don't spout off like that to the college kids you teach."

"I realize it would be taxing your limited intellectual abilities to understand," McKay sighed. "Especially in a person used to a lifetime of stifling all natural urges. Ah, well, killing is something few women understand anyway."

"Sounds to me like a windy excuse to go out and slaughter innocent animals. Or take a day off from responsibilities at home," Mildred added. She dumped the dishwater down the drain. There was a loud sucking noise as the water escaped through the plumbing. "This drain is going to clog up again," she said.

"It wouldn't if you'd stop using it as a garbage disposal."

"Hmmph," she said. She wiped her hands on her apron. "Well, I'm going to open a can of peanuts and watch some TV. What time do you want to be rousted out of bed in the morning, Harry?"

"I'll be getting up much too early for you, my dear. I'll stop for breakfast along the way."

"Well, don't you go getting yourself shot for a deer. Every year you hear about somebody getting shot out in the woods during hunting season."

"I assure you, it's quite deserted where I go. Few hunters know of this place."

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"It's so deserted even the deer don't go there," Mildred said. "Every year it's the same thing. You spend good money on a license, drag out that damn gun—okay, rifle—and go off running around in the woods the first day of deer season. And then that's it. All you come home with is wet feet."

McKay smiled curiously and sighted the rifle at his wife again. "Bang," he said.

Mildred humphed, opened the can of peanuts, and headed for the living room.

"Millie," Harry called after her. "Please try not to get peanuts on the carpet again."

For 25 years McKay had been going hunting the first day of deer season. He only went that one day, and always to a spot where few other hunters went. Once a year was enough. It always satisfied him. And in 25 years he had never once brought home a deer.

As always, the night before his trip he dreamed about that day on Saipan. It was the first week of July, 1944. The island still wasn't officially declared taken, but the Japs were beaten. It was just a matter of blasting them, one by one, out of their caves and holes.

McKay was the point man for a patrol that had run into trouble and was returning late. There wasn't quite an hour of daylight left. McKay was working his way along a little ridge overgrown with brush. It was a good place for a rathole sniper, the kind who sits in little holes in the ground with a little grass roof overhead, waiting for patrols to come by.

They had run into one on the way out and two men had been killed before they finally located the sniper and blasted him out with grenades. McKay's eyes and ears were sharply tuned to catch any movement or sound. But he was still surprised when he saw the Jap. He didn't expect the Jap to be just sitting there, lounging on the grass and enjoying what was left of the sunlight. He was smoking a cigarette. He probably thought it was a safe time to come out of his hole. By now most American patrols would be behind their perimeters of defense.

Still, he didn't expect a Jap to do anything as human as to relax. McKay was always surprised when he found a Jap helmet with a picture of family or a girl friend inside. Just like Americans. But you didn't expect it.

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McKay sighted in and squeezed the trigger. Bang and the Jap lurched and fell backward. His rifle clattered into the hole. When McKay went up to him the Jap was still alive. He had been hit in the back of the neck and there was blood drooling out of his mouth. A fly had settled on his cheek. He looked up at McKay and blinked just before the final shot. In death the shriveled, sun-dried little Jap seemed no more important than a stray dog that McKay had once shot at the garbage dump back home.

It had been the first time McKay had ever killed anyone. The experience left him with a strange feeling that he was unable to explain to himself until much later, until after the war, when he found his power to kill taken away from him. Killing was so effortless, so simple. McKay discovered that he enjoyed killing . . .

When he awoke at four o'clock he was filled with this feeling. He dressed and went downstairs and started a pot of coffee on the stove while he loaded the car. The house was quiet and peaceful now. The only thing that broke his feeling of absolute serenity was an open can of peanuts, half full, on the arm of the living-room couch. He took the can with him into the kitchen, found the plastic lid on the stove top, and put the can in its proper place in the cabinet. Then he sat at the table and sipped a cup of coffee and enjoyed a cigarette until four thirty.

By six o'clock he had driven far enough into the mountains to stop for breakfast. He pulled over at an all-night hash stand that had advertised its hours and its cuisine on faded, weathered signs along five miles of highway. There were two tractor trailers and a pickup truck in the graveled parking lot when McKay drove in. In the back window of the pickup a thirty-thirty lever-action Winchester was visible on a rack.

Inside, the room was permeated with a smoky mustiness that comes from cigarettes and heavy grease. It was a large room, poorly lit, with a few tables and a long low counter. A short-order cook in stained white pants and a T-shirt worked the grill while a sleepy, heavy-hipped waitress leaned against the cash register and smoked a cigarette.

McKay took a stool at the end of the counter closest to the other hunter. The waitress put her cigarette in an ashtray on the counter and came over with her pad.

"Two fried eggs, over easy," McKay said. "Some home fries and a slice of ham. And I'll have my coffee now."

"Get that, Charlie?" the girl said.

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By way of answering, Charlie cracked two eggs over his grill, scooped out a handful of potatoes, and laid a slice of precooked, presliced ham in the mess to warm. The waitress poured the coffee and brought McKay a knife, fork, and spoon. He found himself examining the prongs of the fork for food particles. The coffee was overcooked and bitter.

While he was waiting for his food, McKay swung around and nodded at the other hunter. He was a big man, with a quiet, long-jawed face and dark curly hair. His empty plate was pushed to the side and he was staring into a cup of black coffee.

"Out to try your luck the first day?" McKay said cheerfully.

The man lifted his head, sized up McKay and nodded.

"Me, too," McKay said. "Always go the first day. Never get a deer, of course, but I find that being off by yourself in the woods, where a man can think and not be bothered, is the real lure of hunting. At least, that's the way it is with me. Some men go for the sport of killing."

The man furrowed his brows and looked curiously at McKay.

"You know these woods pretty well?" McKay asked.

"I been up here before," the man answered.

"Maybe you could give a guy like me a few pointers on where to go," McKay said. "Now, I don't mean to horn in on *your* territory, understand. But I'd sure appreciate it if someone would give me a tip as to where I could set up a nice stand."

The man considered for a moment. Then he said, "I usually make a right turn off the main road about six miles up. Puts you on a township road that follows along the ridge. Go in maybe five-six miles, to where you see the scrub oak growing. Had a fire some years ago, so everything looks dwarfed. I usually park along in there somewhere and walk down the ridge. There's a dried-up marsh after you're in a ways. I got a six pointer out of there two seasons ago."

"Well, that's very kind of you," McKay said. "Some men never like to give away their favorite spots."

"It's a free country," the man said.

"It is at that," McKay answered. "You look like a man who helped keep it that way, I might add. What outfit were you in during the war?"

"Thirty-second at Buna," the man said.

"Then you certainly did your share," McKay said. "The thirty-second was quite an outfit. I was in the Pacific myself, in the

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Marines. Second Division, Sixth Regiment."

The man nodded and gulped the last of his coffee. "Well, I'd better get a move on," he said.

"Nice talking to you," McKay said. "Maybe I'll run into you out there."

McKay found the pickup parked along the road where the man in the restaurant had said it would be. He drove on a mile beyond it before he pulled over and got his rifle from the back seat.

It was breaking into a cold day, but without wind. The sky was an iron overcast. McKay went down a short embankment at the side of the road and followed a narrow ravine through waist-high scrub oak. He looked straight ahead, stepping carefully, with his rifle in both hands, just as he had done when he was point man for a patrol during the war.

The tension had been building in him from the moment he had stepped out of the car. He made his way into the deeper brush, moving carefully, slowly, bringing his feet down soundlessly on the hard frozen ground. Then the brush started to thin out and give way to full-size trees. He came to a tiny creek and stopped. Something inside him told him to change direction, and he moved on again, bearing to his right.

He came to a place that was thickly grown over with laurel. He had to bend to make his way through it. After a while he came to a small clearing. The laurel and dogwood bushes formed a tight canopy overhead. The little creek widened here and dipped over a tiny rock bed into a shallow pool of moving water. The ground around the pool was torn up.

McKay backed out of the clearing and circled around through the underbrush. Then he stopped. Through the brush he could see the man from the restaurant warming his hands over a small kerosene heater. He was sitting on a log that had fallen between two trees, with his back to McKay.

McKay crept up behind the other hunter. There was a wild quickening of his pulse, but every muscle of his body went loose. It was just like the old days, just like being on Saipan. The woods were deathly quiet.

When he was close enough to get a good shot he dropped to one knee and aimed at the middle of the man's back. He rammed a cartridge into the chamber. At the sound of the bolt snapping, the other hunter turned around.

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"Bang," McKay said, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet tore into the man's shoulder and bowled him over. He was on his hands and knees, scrambling for his rifle, when the second bullet tore into his face and exploded out the back of his head. He threw his arms out and collapsed.

McKay came up and sat down on the log. He looked at the still body of the other hunter. "You should really try to understand," he said aloud to the dead man. "Having been at Buna."

Mildred was at the stove stirring hot chocolate when McKay came in through the kitchen. The table was a mess of toast crumbs, butter smears, and dirty dishes. McKay closed the milk container and returned it to the refrigerator.

"Empty-handed again," Mildred said.

"Yes, but with my spirit cleansed."

"It was on the news about some hunter with his head blown off. Every year people keep getting killed."

"Don't let that dishearten you, my dear. These accidents *do* happen. But it's such a lovely experience that any risk involved is entirely worth it. While I was out in the woods today I met a husband and wife who go hunting together. Delightful people," McKay said. "Next year I think I shall insist you accompany me."

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Georges Simenon

Inspector Maigret Thinks

The story of two hangings on the Seine, against the interesting background of weirs and locks, barges and tugs, with Inspector Maigret called into the case when all the other investigators had failed—Maigret as surly as the Seine itself, Maigret puffing constantly on his pipe, Maigret perplexed and irritable and grumbling and finally coming round to "thinking bargee"—to thinking the way barge people do . . .

Detective: INSPECTOR MAIGRET

The lock-keeper at Coudray was a thin sad-looking chap, dressed in corduroys, with a drooping mustache and a suspicious eye—a type one often meets among bailiffs.

He made no distinction between Maigret and the fifty people—detectives from Corbeil, officials from the Public Prosecutor's office, and reporters—to whom, for the last two days, he had been telling his story; and while he did so he kept watching, up and down river, the greenish-blue surface of the Seine.

It was November. It was cold, and a white sky—garishly white—was reflected in the water.

"I had got up at six in the morning to look after my wife," he said, and Maigret thought to himself how it was always these decent sad-looking men who have sick wives to take care of.

"Even as I was lighting the fire it seemed to me that I heard something. But it was later, while I was upstairs preparing the poultice, that I finally realized that someone was shouting. I went downstairs again. From the lock itself I made out a dark shape against the weir.

" 'What is it?' I shouted. A hoarse voice replied with 'Help!'

" 'What are you doing there?' I asked him.

"He went on shouting, 'Help! Help!' So I got out my dinghy to

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go over. I saw it was the *Astrolabe.* As it was getting brighter, I was finally able to make out old Claessens on the deck. I'd swear he was still drunk, and knew no more than I did what the barge was doing on the weir. The dog was loose, even though I had asked him to keep it tied up. That's all—that's all I know."

What mattered for him was that a barge should have come and run aground on his weir, at the risk, if the current had been stronger, of smashing it. The fact that the only thing found on board—other than the drunken old stableman and a big sheepdog—was two hanging corpses, a man and a woman—that didn't concern him at all.

The *Astrolabe,* afloat again, was still there, about a hundred and fifty meters off, guarded by a policeman who kept himself warm by marching up and down on the towpath. She was an old motorless barge—an *écurie*, or stable, as they call the boats that ply mainly on the canals and keep their horses on board. Passing cyclists looked around at this grayish hull that all the newspapers had been full of for the last two days.

As usual when everyone else had failed to uncover anything new, Chief Inspector Maigret was called in. Everyone concerned had been engaged on the inquiry, and the witnesses had already been interrogated fifty times, first by the police, then by the Corbeil detectives, the magistrates, and the reporters.

— "You'll find Emile Gradut did it!" everybody kept telling him.

And Maigret, who had just questioned Gradut for two hours, had come back to the scene of the crime, and stood there, hands in the pockets of his thick overcoat, looking surly, smoking his pipe in little short puffs, staring at the sullen landscape as if he wanted to buy a plot there.

The interest lay not in the Coudray lock where the barge had been stranded, but at the other end of the reach, eight kilometers upstream at the Citanguette lock.

The same setting as down here, in short. The villages of Morsang and Seineport were on the opposite bank some distance away so that one saw only the quiet water fringed with trees and, here and there, the hollow of a disused sandpit.

But at Citanguette there was a bistro. The barges went to any lengths to lie there overnight. A real waterman's inn where they sold bread, tinned food, sausage, ropes, and oats for the horses.

It was there that Maigret really conducted his investigation, without seeming to, having a drink now and then, sitting by the

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stove, going for little strolls outside while the owner—a woman so fair she might almost have been an albino—watched him with respect tinged with irony . . .

—

That is what was known about the Wednesday evening.

Just as it was beginning to get dark, the *Eaglet*, a small tug from the upper Seine, had brought her six barges like chicks up to the Citanguette lock. At that time a fine rain was falling. When the boats had been moored, the men as usual had gathered at the bistro for a drink while the lock-keeper was putting away his gear.

The *Astrolabe* appeared at the bend only half an hour later when darkness had already fallen. Old Arthur Aerts, the skipper, was at the helm, while on the path Claessens walked ahead of his horses, his whip on his shoulder.

Then the *Astrolabe* moored at the end of the line, and Claessens had taken his horses aboard. At the time nobody was paying any attention to them.

It was after seven o'clock, and everybody had already finished eating, when Aerts and Claessens entered the bistro and sat down beside the stove. The skipper of the *Eaglet* was holding forth, and the two had no need to say anything. The flaxen-headed innkeeper, a baby in her arms, served them four or five cheap brandies without paying much attention.

This, Maigret now understood, was the way of things here. They all knew one another, more or less. One entered with a casual greeting. One went and sat down without saying anything. Sometimes a woman came in, but it was to do her shopping for the next day, after which she would say to her husband, busy drinking, "Don't be too late coming back . . ."

It had been that way with Aerts's wife, Emma, who had bought bread, eggs, a rabbit.

And from this moment onward every detail became of the utmost importance, every piece of evidence was tremendously valuable. So Maigret was insistent. "You're sure that when he left, about ten o'clock, Arthur Aerts was drunk?"

"Blind drunk, as usual," the patronne answered. "He was a Belgian, after all. A good chap, really, who sat quietly in his corner and drank until he had only just enough strength to get back on board."

"And Claessens, the stableman?"

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"It took more than that to make him drunk. He stayed about another quarter of an hour, then he left, after coming back to look for his whip which he had forgotten."

So far everything was going well. It was easy to picture the bank of the Seine at night below the lock, the tug at the head, the six lighters behind her, then the Aerts barge; on each boat a stable lantern and falling over it all, a fine steady drizzle.

About half-past nine Emma arrived back on board with her shopping. At ten Aerts got back in his turn, blind drunk as the woman in the bistro had said. And a quarter past ten the stableman finally made for the *Astrolabe*.

"I was only waiting for him to go to close up, for the watermen go to bed early, and there was no one else left."

So much for what was tangible and reliable.

From then on there was not a scrap of exact information. At six in the morning the skipper of the tug was amazed that the *Astrolabe* was no longer to be seen behind his lighters, and a few moments later he noticed that the mooring lines had been cut.

Just then the Coudray lock-keeper, tending his wife, heard the shouts of the old stableman, and shortly afterward found the barge grounded against his weir.

The dog on the deck was loose. The stableman, who had just been wakened by the impact, knew nothing, and claimed that he had been asleep all night with the horses as usual.

But, aft in the cabin, Aerts had been found hanged, not with a rope but with the dog's chain. Then, behind a curtain that screened off the washbasin, his wife Emma was found hanged—in her case with a sheet pulled off the bed.

And this was not all: when he was on the point of sailing, the skipper of the tug *Eaglet* called in vain for his engineer, Emile Gradut, and found he had disappeared.

"It was Gradut who did it." Everyone was agreed, and that evening the newspapers had headings like:

Gradut Seen Prowling Near Seineport
Manhunt in the Forest of Rougeau
Aerts Savings Still Missing

For all the statements confirmed that old Aerts had a nest egg, and everyone even agreed on the amount—one hundred thousand francs. Why? It was quite a story—or, rather, it was very simple. Aerts, who was sixty and had two grown-up sons, married, had

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taken Emma as his second wife; and Emma, from Strasbourg, was only forty.

Now, things weren't going at all well with them. At every lock Emma complained about the meanness of the old man, who barely gave her enough to eat on.

"I don't even know where he keeps his money," she used to say. "He wants it to go to his sons if he should die . . . And *I* have to kill myself looking after him, steering the boat, to say nothing of . . ." She would go into cynical detail, to Aerts's face if need be, while Aerts stubbornly confined himself to shaking his head.

Only after she had gone he would murmur, "She only married me for my hundred thousand francs. But she'll be diddled."

Or Emma would say, "As if his sons needed it to live."

In fact, the elder, Joseph, was skipper of a tug in Antwerp, and Theodore, assisted by his father, had bought a fine motor launch, the *Marie-France,* which had just been reached on its way to Maastricht in Holland.

"But I'll find them, his hundred thousand francs . . ." She would tell you this without thinking, even if she had known you for only five minutes; she would give you the most intimate details about her old husband, and would then conclude cynically, "All the same, he doesn't imagine it was for love that a young woman like me . . ."

And she was deceiving him. The evidence was indisputable. Even the skipper of the *Eaglet* knew all about it.

"I am only telling you what I know . . . But without a doubt during the fortnight we were lying idle at Alfortville, and while the *Astrolabe* was loading, Emile Gradut often used to go and see her, even in broad daylight."

So?

Emile Gradut, who was twenty-three, was a rat, that was clear. Actually, he had been arrested twenty-four hours later, starving in the forest of Rougeau less than five kilometers from Citanguette.

"I haven't done anything!" he screamed at the policemen as he tried to ward off the blows.

An unhealthy little lecher, repellent, whom Maigret questioned for two hours in his office, and who had repeated obstinately, "I haven't done anything."

"Then why did you clear off?"

"That's my business!"

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As for the examining magistrate, who was sure that Gradut had hidden the money in the forest, he had the place combed again, without result.

There was something infinitely dreary about all this, like the river which reflected the same sky from morning to night, like the string of boats that announced their presence with hooters—one blast for each barge under tow—and which were endlessly edging their way in and out of the lock. Then, while the women on the deck, busying themselves with the kids, kept an eye on the barges, the men went up to the bistro, had a quick drink, and came back with heavy tread.

All crystal clear, one of his colleagues had said to Maigret. And yet Maigret, surly as the Seine itself, as a canal in the rain, had come back to his lock and couldn't tear himself away again.

It's always the same thing: when an affair appears to be clear nobody thinks of going deeper into the details. For everyone it was Gradut who had done it, and he looked so much the type who might that this in itself was taken as evidence.

Notwithstanding, there were now the results of two post-mortems, which produced some strange conclusions. Thus, for Arthur Aerts, Dr. Paul said, "Slight contusion under chin . . . From the degree of rigor mortis and the contents of the stomach can state that death by strangulation took place between ten and ten thirty."

Now, Aerts had come back on board at ten. According to the albino-blonde patronne, Claessens had followed him a quarter of an hour later, and Claessens had stated that he had gone straight to bed.

Was the light on in the Aerts's cabin?

"I don't know."

Was the dog loose?

The poor old man had thought for a long time, only to end with a helpless gesture. No, he didn't know . . . He hadn't noticed . . . Could he possibly have foreseen that his doings on that particular evening would become of prime importance after the event? He was half-seas-over. He was sleeping fully dressed on the straw, in the pungent odor of the horses.

"Didn't hear anything? Anything at all?"

He didn't know, he couldn't have known! He was asleep, and when he woke up he found himself in midstream, up against the weir.

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There was another piece of evidence, but could it be relied on? It was by Madame Couturier, the wife of the skipper of *Eaglet*. The chief inspector at Corbeil had questioned her as well as the others before letting the convoy proceed on its way toward the Loing canal. Maigret had the transcript in his pocket.

Question: You heard nothing during the night?

Answer: I wouldn't like to swear that.

Q: Tell me what you heard.

A: It's so hazy . . . At one time I woke up and I looked at the time on the alarm clock. It was a quarter to eleven. It seemed to me that someone was talking near the boat.

Q: You didn't recognize the voices?

A: No. But I thought it was Gradut having a rendezvous with Emma. I must have gone back to sleep straight away.

Could one rely on this? And even if it were true, what did it prove?

Below the dam, a tug, its six barges, and the *Astrolabe* had been moored for the night, and . . .

The report on Aerts was clear: he had died by strangulation between ten and ten thirty. But the story grew complicated with the second of Dr. Paul's reports, the one that referred to Emma.

The right cheek bore traces of bruising caused either by a blunt instrument or by a violent blow from a fist. As to the time of death—caused by hanging—it must have been about one a.m.

And here was Maigret, sinking deeper and deeper into the slow, heavy way of life of Citanguette, as if it was only there that he could think. A motor launch flying Belgian colors made him think of Aerts's son, who must by now have arrived in Paris.

The Belgian colors made him think, too, of the gin. For, on the table in the cabin, a gin bottle had been found, more than half empty. The cabin itself had been ransacked from top to bottom: even the mattress had been ripped open, and the stuffing was spread all round.

All this, of course, in a search for the savings. Those who had been first on the scene were saying, "It's all very simple. Emile Gradut killed Aerts and Emma. Then he got drunk and hunted for the money, and now he's got it hidden in the forest."

But there was one difficulty: Dr. Paul's post-mortem on Emma revealed that *she* had drunk all the gin.

Well, so what? Then it was Emma who drank the gin, and not Gradut.

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Perfectly clear, was the answer. Gradut, having killed Aerts, got his wife drunk so as to have the upper hand more easily—for you remember she was a strong woman.

If you believed that story, Gradut and his mistress had both stayed aboard from ten or half-past, when Arthur Aerts died, until midnight or one in the morning, when Emma died . . .

It was possible, of course . . . anything was possible. But Maigret wanted—it was hard to put into words—he wanted to come round to "thinking bargee"—that's to say, to thinking as the barge folk did.

He had been quite as hard as the others on Gradut. For two hours he had kept grilling him. To begin with he had used the same old velvet-glove line, as they call it at Headquarters. "Now, listen to me, my boy, you're mixed up in this, that's obvious. But, frankly, I don't believe you killed them both."

"I didn't do anything!"

"All right, you didn't kill them. But own up, you pushed the old man round a bit. It was his own fault, after all—he disturbed you, so in self-defense you—"

"I didn't do anything!"

"As for Emma, of course you wouldn't have touched her, seeing she was your mistress."

"You're wasting your time—I didn't do anything!"

Then Maigret got tougher, even threatening. "Ah, so that's the way it is. Well, we'll see once you're on the boat with the corpses."

But Gradut had not flinched at the prospect of a reconstruction of the crime. "Whenever you like. I didn't do anything."

"Wait till they find the money you've got stowed away."

At that Emile Gradut had smiled, and it was such a pitying, superior smile . . .

That evening there were only two boats lying at Citanguette, a motor launch and an *écurie*. Below, at the weir, a policeman stood sentry on the deck of the *Astrolabe*; he was very surprised when Maigret climbed aboard, saying, "I haven't time to go back to Paris. I'll sleep here."

You could hear the soft lapping of the water against the hull; then the policeman, who was afraid of falling asleep, started marching up and down the deck. He, poor man, soon began to wonder if Maigret had gone mad, for he was making as much noise down there as if the horses had been let loose in the hold.

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"Tell me, young man . . ." It was Maigret emerging from the hatchway. "You couldn't find me a pickax?"

Find a pickax, at ten at night, in a place like this! However, the policeman woke the lock-keeper with the mournful look. And the lock-keeper had a pickax that he used in his garden.

"What's that Inspector of yours going to do with it?"

"I haven't the faintest . . ."

As for Maigret, he went back to the cabin with his pickax and for the next hour the policeman heard muffled blows.

"Look, young man . . ."

It was Maigret again, sweating and puffing, who stuck his head through the hatch. "Go and make a phone call for me. I want the examining magistrate to come over first thing tomorrow morning, and he is to have Emile Gradut brought along . . ."

Never had the lock-keeper looked so lugubrious as when he piloted the magistrate toward the barge, while Gradut followed between two policemen. "No, I swear to you, I don't know anything . . ."

There was Maigret, fast asleep on Aerts's bed. He didn't even make any excuse; he gave the impression of not noticing the magistrate's amazement at the state of the cabin. The floor had, in fact, been torn up. Under this floor there was a layer of cement, but this had been shattered by great blows from a pickax; it was complete chaos.

"Come in, sir. I went to bed very late, and I haven't yet had time to tidy myself up." Maigret lit his pipe. Somewhere he had found some bottles of beer, and he poured himself a glass.

"Come in, Gradut. And now . . ."

"Yes," the magistrate said, "and now . . . ?"

"It's very simple," Maigret said, sucking at his pipe. "I'm going to explain what happened the other night. You see, there's one thing that struck me from the start: old Aerts was hanged with a chain, and his wife was hanged with a sheet."

"I don't see—"

"You will. Look through all the police records and I swear you won't find one case—not one single one—of a man who hanged himself using a wire or a chain. It's strange, perhaps, but it's true. Suicides tend to be soft, more or less, and the idea of the links biting into their necks and pinching the skin . . ."

"So Arthur Aerts was murdered?"

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"That's my conclusion, yes. Especially as the bruise on his chin seems to prove that the chain—which was thrown over his head from behind while he was drunk—first struck his face—"

"I don't see—"

"Wait! Next you should note that his wife, for her part, was found hanged with a twisted sheet from the bed. Not even a rope, though on board a boat there are plenty of them. No—a sheet from the bed, which is about the nicest way of hanging oneself, if I may put it like that."

"Which means what?"

"That she hanged herself. Obviously she did, because to give herself courage she had to swallow half a liter of gin—she who never drank at all. Remember the doctor's report."

"I remember."

"So, one murder and one suicide; the murder committed at about a quarter past ten, the suicide at midnight or one o'clock in the morning. From then on everything begins to get simple."

The magistrate was looking at him with some distrust, Emile Gradut with ironic curiosity.

"For a long time now," Maigret continued, "Emma, who didn't get what she wanted by her marriage to old Aerts, and who was in love with Emile Gradut, had been haunted by one idea: to get hold of the old man's savings and go off with her lover.

"Suddenly she has the chance. Aerts comes home in a very drunken state. Gradut is only a few steps away, aboard the tug. She has seen, on going to make her purchases at the bistro, that her husband is already well on the way to being drunk. So she unchains the dog and waits with the chain all ready to slip round the old man's neck."

"But—" the magistrate objected.

"All in good time. Let me finish. Now Aerts is dead . . . Emma, drunk with triumph, runs to get Gradut, and here don't forget that the tug skipper's wife hears voices at a quarter to eleven. Is that right, Gradut?"

"That's right!"

"The two of them come back on board to look for the savings, search everywhere, even in the mattress, and don't find the hundred thousand francs. Is that right, Gradut?"

"That's right!"

"Time passes, and Gradut grows impatient. I bet he even starts wondering if he hasn't been hoaxed, wondering if the hundred

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thousand francs really exists. Emma swears it does. But what's the use of that, if it isn't discovered? They start searching again. Gradut has had enough. He knows he will be accused—he wants to be off. Emma wants to go with him."

"Excuse me, but—" the magistrate murmured.

"Later! As I was saying, she wants to be off with him, and, as he has no wish to be encumbered with a woman who hasn't even any money, he gets out of it by punching her on the jaw. Then, once he's on shore, he cuts the mooring ropes of the barge. Is that right, Gradut?"

This time Gradut was slow to reply.

"That's almost all there is," Maigret concluded. "If they had discovered the money, they would have gone off together, or they would have tried to make the old man's death look like suicide. As they didn't find it, Gradut, scared out of his wits, roams around the countryside trying to hide.

"As for Emma, she comes to find the boat drifting on the current, and the corpse swinging beside her. No hope left. Not even a chance of getting away . . . Claessens would have to be wakened to pole the boat along . . . Everything's gone wrong. And she, in turn, decides to kill herself. Only she hasn't enough courage, so she takes a drink, chooses a soft sheet from the bed . . ."

"Is that right, Gradut?" the magistrate asked, watching the wretch.

"Since the Inspector says so . . ."

"But wait a moment . . ." the magistrate retorted. "What is there to prove that he didn't find the savings, and that, just to keep the money . . . ?"

At that Maigret merely stretched out a foot and pushed away some pieces of cement, revealing a neat hiding place containing Belgian and French gold coins. "Now you understand?"

"Almost," the magistrate murmured, without conviction.

And Maigret, refilling his pipe, grumbled. "One ought to have known in the first place that the bottoms of old barges are repaired with cement . . . Nobody told me that."

Then, with a sudden change of tone, "The best of it is that I've counted it, and it does in fact amount to one hundred thousand francs . . . Queer kind of couple don't you think?"

"Q"

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Hugh Pentecost

Volcano in the Mind

More than twenty years ago Hugh Pentecost wrote a series of short novels about psychiatrist-detective Dr. John Smith, and the book in which the series appeared has virtually "disappeared." Few if any readers have ever heard of it; critics never mention it; and even collectors are still searching for copies. Yet the book was, and is, an important one, and its contents should not be permitted to vanish into limbo.

The main character, Dr. John Smith, is a little gray man with a flat voice and a quiet, unobtrusive manner. There seems to be absolutely nothing distinguished or distinctive about him—he is, in appearance and personality, as colorless as his name. And the simple truth is, you wouldn't look twice at this neutral, ageless, inconspicuous man, either in a crowd or in a living room. But if you were a murderer that could be a fatal mistake.

For Dr. John Smith is perhaps the ideal criminologist: he has a scalpel-sharp mind, a depth of psychiatric knowledge of the human heart and its motivations, an expert interrogating technique, and an intensely probing curiosity that penetrates far below the meanings of physical clues.

The short novels about Dr. Smith are not "action" stories—not if you interpret action as gunplay, fisticuffs, or exciting chases. The action is in the mind, in the battle of wits, in the play and counterplay of human forces—the ancient, never-ending struggle between good and evil. Dr. Smith believes that "the most exciting mysteries lie in digging into the subconscious portions of the human mind."

Here is the absorbing story of a man haunted and tortured by three successive impulses to murder the person he loves best. We promise you a fascinating investigation of a diabolical murder plot, and central to that investigation, a study-in-depth of character and environment . . . a memorable short novel.

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The small gray man knelt beside the body. The others stood in a circle focusing the lights of their electric torches on him. It was a brief examination. He stood up, and instinctively the others lifted their torches to light his expressionless face.

"He's quite dead," he said. "I doubt if there's a single bone left unbroken in his body."

There was the sound of a muffled sob that came from a woman somewhere outside the circle of light.

"There's no doubt about it, Dr. Smith?" The questioner was a State Trooper.

"None, Captain Walsh," the doctor said. He raised his eyes to the darkness which seemed to be pressing down on them. "How far up are the ledges?"

"A good two hundred feet," Walsh said.

The doctor shrugged. "That accounts for it."

"Dangerous place to be at night."

A toneless voice spoke from deep in the shadows. "Especially if you're with a murderer."

The torches turned to light the face of the man who'd spoken. He was tall and dark. He looked shriveled inside his tweed jacket. The torches accentuated lines and shadows, but this man's eyes seemed to be sunk into his head.

He was standing next to a girl with red-gold hair. His arm was around her shoulder and his hand looked large and white against the black cloth of her coat.

"Stephen! Stephen, darling!" the girl said in a protesting tone.

The man looked down at her and a nerve quivered in his cheek. Then he lifted his weary, dark eyes to the line of torches.

I think I murdered him," he said.

"Take it easy, Mr. Drake," Walsh said. "Everybody knows Dr. Bristow was one of your closest friends. You can't blame yourself for an accident."

"I don't think it was an accident," Stephen Drake said. "I think I murdered him."

A young man came out of the crowd to stand beside Dr. Smith and Captain Walsh. His face in profile was sharply, handsomely modeled. He had on riding clothes. "Look, Captain Walsh," he said, in a voice lowered so that it would not carry beyond the doctor and the State Trooper. "Stephen's been very sick. He's overwrought. We ought to get him back home." He turned to the doctor. "I understand you're vacationing here in town, sir?"

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"That's right," Dr. Smith said.

"I'm Ted Hunter, Stephen's brother-in-law. Stephen's been under Bristow's care for several weeks." Hunter glanced down at the body, then quickly lifted his eyes. "Could you come back to the house with us? I'm afraid he's already gone to pieces from the shock of this."

Dr. John Smith nodded. "Yes. I'll come," he said. But he didn't move for a moment. "Your brother-in-law has a strange way of expressing himself, Mr. Hunter. Most men *know* if they've committed a murder."

Dr. Smith rode back to town in the police car with Captain Walsh. They rode in silence for most of the way. The State Trooper glanced from time to time at the doctor whose face was illuminated by the glow from the dash and wondered at his peculiar, anonymous quality. It was Walsh's business to notice people, but he had only learned tonight, when a doctor was needed, that Smith was in town and had been for more than a month.

"Who is Stephen Drake?" the doctor asked, breaking the silence. His voice was colorless, flat.

"Local boy who made good," Walsh said. "President of Drake Aircraft. The plant's about twenty miles down Route 9. You may have seen it." The doctor didn't indicate whether he'd seen it or not. "He employs about half the people in Woodfield."

"And the dead man?"

Walsh frowned, his eyes on the road ahead. "Dr. Bristow was one swell guy," he said. "Local boy, too. I guess he and Stephen Drake are the two people the folks here in Woodfield are proudest of. Bob Bristow had a brilliant career as a surgeon ahead of him. He chose to come back here and take care of his own. People loved him for that. He's a great loss to us, Dr. Smith."

"I could wish for such an epitaph," the doctor said. He stared at the instrument panel of the car as if it fascinated him. "What were they doing on that mountain trail at night if it's so dangerous?"

"You hadn't heard about the Conroy kid, Doctor?"

"What about him?"

"Frankie Conroy. He's seven. His father runs the local meat market. He's been lost all day. The whole town's been looking for him. The Drake family and Dr. Bristow were looking for him on the mountain."

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"You mean the boy may still be up there?"

"No. He was found several hours ago." Walsh shook his head. "That's the ironic part of it. He was found quite a while before Doc Bristow fell. He got locked in a root cellar at his own house."

"Why were the people looking for him on the mountain?"

"Somebody thought they'd seen a kid headed that way."

They rode in silence for a while. Then Dr. Smith said, "Why would Stephen Drake murder Bristow?"

Walsh laughed. "He wouldn't. Ted's right. Stephen's been sick and the accident's shocked him out of making sense. He probably thinks he could have saved the doc somehow. He and Bristow were the closest of friends."

Dr. Smith turned to look at Walsh. His eyes were gray and thoughtful. "Crime is your business, Captain Walsh, not mine. But I should think the instances of a man murdering a total stranger were rather rare. I would hardly classify friendship as an alibi."

Walsh laughed. "Don't go dreaming things up, Doctor."

They slowed and turned through a pair of iron gates. Ahead of them, up a graveled driveway, the doctor saw a big stone house. It seemed to be lighted from top to bottom. There were several cars pulled up in front of it.

"Drake place," Walsh said. "They'll be needing you for Stephen."

They got out of the car and walked to the front door. Walsh went in as if he were an old friend. They were in a large entrance hall. A wide stairway with a polished mahogany rail curved upward to the second floor. There was a fireplace at one end of the hall.

The whole place looked like a picture gallery. There were more than a dozen large oil paintings hung about the walls: landscapes, portraits, and two rather extraordinary abstractions. It wasn't necessary to be a connoisseur to recognize that they were all the work of one artist, a man with extraordinary vitality and color sense.

The doctor stood looking around at the paintings. He seemed so interested in them that it was an effort for him to turn his attention to the girl who came out of the room to the right of the front door. It was the same girl he had seen a little while before, clinging to Stephen Drake. The clear light here showed how delicate and sensitive her beauty was. She'd been crying but the evidence

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of it didn't leave an impression of weakness.

"Thank you, Captain, for bringing the doctor," she said. She held out her hand to Dr. Smith. "I'm Marcia Drake. I tried to persuade Stephen to go to bed, but he's refused. He's in the study. He insists on talking to Captain Walsh, but he's not up to it. Really he's not. If you could only make him see, Doctor—"

"See what, Mrs. Drake?"

"That's he's torturing himself with something quite unreal."

"Most of us do," the doctor said. "Will you take me in?"

"This way."

"I want to talk to Ted about what happened," Walsh said. "Where is he?"

"In the living room, Captain. Maybe you'll need a drink as much as the rest of them do."

Dr. Smith followed Marcia Drake into the study. It was a dark, book-lined room. French windows opened onto a terrace beyond. The July night sent a warm breeze stirring through the room. It played tricks with the spiral of smoke from the cigarette in the ashtray on the desk.

Stephen Drake sat behind the desk, elbows resting on it, face in his hands. As Marcia and the doctor came in he looked up. His eyes looked haunted.

"This is Dr. Smith, Stephen."

"Hullo, Doctor," Stephen said. His voice was so weary it seemed impossible he could say anything else, but he did. "I'm past needing pills or sedatives, Doctor. I just need to tell my story to Walsh and get it over with."

"Please tell him he hasn't the strength for this, Dr. Smith," Marcia said. "He mustn't talk now."

"Perhaps he must," the doctor said. He moved out of the range of the cone of light thrown down on the desk by the student lamp. "I understand you've been sick, Mr. Drake."

"I—I had a crack-up," Stephen said. "Usual thing from overwork I guess. Low blood pressure, rapid pulse, overexcited reflexes, no sleep. We've been building planes, Dr. Smith—thousands of planes. I've been at it, fifteen—twenty hours a day. I didn't have what it took. I must say I didn't expect to fall apart at thirty-four."

"The treatment?" Dr. Smith asked.

"Rest, more rest. Sleeping pills. High protein diet. Injections of iron and liver. All unimportant. All very, very unimportant."

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"Is it?"

"Yes, Doctor. You see, what happened tonight has been coming for days and days. I've been on the verge of committing murder three times before tonight. I guess I've known all along that sooner or later I couldn't resist it. Something's snapped inside me, Doctor. I just want to tell my story and be taken some place where I can't do any harm."

"Stephen!" Marcia cried. "You mustn't talk that way."

The doctor's voice was unmoved. "So you resisted three impulses to kill Dr. Bristow and then finally gave in to a fourth one?"

Stephen shook his head. "That's the mad part, the insane part, Doctor. Bob Bristow was my only hope, my only refuge. The other three times when it came so close it wasn't Bob I wanted to kill."

He took a deep breath and seemed to drag his voice up from a well of horror. He looked at his wife. "It was you, darling. It was you I nearly murdered."

For a moment Marcia Drake stared at her husband, her eyes wide and frightened, the back of her right hand pressed against her mouth. Then the tension broke. "Stephen, that's a joke—a horrible, bad joke!"

Stephen didn't answer. He had covered his face once more. A breath of wind sent a sheet of paper drifting slowly down from the desk. The doctor watched it as if he were vitally interested in just where it might land on the rug.

"Perhaps it's not a joke," he said. He might have been talking to himself.

Captain Walsh found three people in the living room. He knew them all well. Ted Hunter was mixing drinks at a small portable bar. Harriet Moore, Ted's maiden aunt, sat in a big wing chair by the fireplace. She was a dark, wiry woman in her early fifties. The tweed skirt, the high-collared, white shirtwaist, the short, military-cut jacket with padded shoulders gave an impression of smart severity. Steel knitting needles clicked in her fingers, an automatic process which apparently required no concentration. She glanced up at Walsh, who had taken a notebook from his pocket as he came into the room.

"Must you act like a policeman?" she asked.

"Sorry," Walsh said. "I have to make a report, you know."

"Give the man a drink," Harriet said.

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The third person in the room was Michael Cleghorn, a huge, shaggy, St. Bernardlike man, who was the Drakes' nearest neighbor. He was an artist. His hands looked big and clumsy, but they could work magic with a paintbrush.

He, too, had been brought up in Woodfield. He, Bob Bristow, Ted, Stephen, and Marcia had been a cliquish gang of kids together. Walsh, who had been a town boy and moved in another social sphere, had thought them all rather snobbish in those days. But he had secretly admired them, and today he liked them.

"This is a hell of a thing to have happened," Walsh said.

Cleghorn was sprawled in a leather chair, his legs draped over one side, a rugged curve-stemmed pipe between his teeth. "I wish it could have been me," he said. "Bob was some use in this world."

Ted came over from the bar with a drink for Walsh. "Cleg is always so noble," he said. Walsh was used to the mocking note in his voice. "Nobody ever really wishes it was them. But it's a nice sentiment."

"I've got to know what happened," Walsh said.

Ted picked up a cigarette from an ashtray on the bar. "There's nothing very clear about it, Jim. It was dark. We were all in a group together. I think Bob stepped aside to let Marcia or Harriet pass him on the path. He didn't realize how close to the edge he was and lost his footing."

"God, I'll never forget the sound of his voice as he fell," Cleghorn said. "He sounded like a child, screaming."

"There's no point in reliving it over and over, Mike," Harriet said.

"Damn it, Harriet, I loved that guy!" Cleghorn said.

"We all loved him," Harriet said. "But having loved him isn't going to help things."

"Will you tell me how you happened to go up the mountain—the whole thing from the beginning?" Walsh asked.

"That's simple enough," Ted said. He had perched himself on the edge of a table, his riding boots swinging rhythmically back and forth. "I'd been out on an all-day ride with Joe Davis. When I got back here I found Marcia, Stephen, Harriet, Cleg, and Bob out on the terrace. They were all talking about the Conroy kid being lost."

"Marcia had been to a meeting in the village and heard the story there," Harriet said.

"Well, Joe and I had passed the foot of Lookout Trail on the

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way home. I saw a small kid fooling around the foot of the path. I didn't know about the Conroy boy then, so I didn't think anything of it. When I heard about him I wondered if it could have been him I saw. Of course it turns out it wasn't, but at the time I thought it might have been."

"You don't know who the boy was you saw?"

"I haven't any idea. At the time I didn't pay much attention. We passed maybe fifty or sixty yards from him. He was just a little boy. When I mentioned it, Stephen got steamed up about it. He thought we ought to go look for him."

"We used to play around the trail when we were kids," Cleg said. "Stephen knew it would be dangerous after dark, and it was getting late then. We all agreed to go take a look."

"Marcia and Harriet got flashlights and we all drove out in the car," Ted said. He tossed his cigarette into the empty fireplace. "At the time I didn't think Stephen was strong enough to make the climb, and I said so. Bob thought it was all right. I wish I'd been stubborn about it."

"Why?"

"For God's sake, Jim, you heard him out there! That wacky talk about murder!"

"It was a shock, naturally," Walsh said. "He probably thought there was something he could have done to save Bob. Well, go ahead."

"We left the car at the foot of the trail and started up," Ted said. "You've been up there, Jim. There are half a dozen paths that branch off the main trail. They all come out on the ledges eventually, and the Conroy kid could have taken any of them, we assumed. I guess I left the party first, didn't I?"

Cleg nodded confirmation. "I took the second branch-off," he said. "We were yelling for the kid all the time, but of course he didn't answer."

"I left Stephen and Marcia at the next fork," Harriet said. "They went on up the main trail together with Bob."

"Bob must have taken the next cutoff," Ted said, "because when I got to the ledges he was there alone. Stephen and Marcia turned up next and Harriet and Cleg joined us at about the same time. There was no sign of the kid, so we figured there wasn't anything more we could do. We decided to take the short way down."

"You know that narrow path, right on the edge of the ledges," Cleg said.

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Walsh nodded.

"You have to go single file," Ted said. "We were all standing at the head of the path. I think it was Bob who suggested the girls go first. We could help light the way from behind."

"Marcia led the way," Harriet said. "I was right behind her."

"It happened before we really got started," Cleg said.

Ted lit another cigarette. He was frowning. "That's the way it was, Jim. We were all in a sort of confused huddle there. Then Bob let out a yell and was gone. Maybe somebody jostled him going past. Maybe the ground gave way. It's all shale."

"We had to go down by the path," Cleg said. "It must have been nearly three quarters of an hour before we found Bob. Then Harriet went to the car and drove for help. Maybe if we could have gotten to Bob sooner—"

Walsh shook his head. "He was killed instantly." A startled look in Cleg's face made him turn.

Marcia stood in the doorway. Cleg hauled himself up out of his chair and went across to her.

"What is it, sweet?" he asked.

She looked at Walsh. "Who is this Dr. Smith?" she asked.

"I don't know much about him," Walsh said. "He rented the Parker cottage for the summer. Supposed to be on a holiday. Why?"

"We've got to do something," Marcia said. "Stephen persists in the crazy notion that he's responsible for Bob's falling. He's quite out of his head. He even talked about having tried to murder me."

"The doctor'll give him something to make him sleep," Walsh said.

"But he *isn't!*" Marcia protested. "He seems to be encouraging Stephen to talk this crazy way."

The doctor was somewhere in the shadow, out of the range of the light on the desk. Somehow it made it easier for Stephen to talk without seeing the doctor's face. He managed to light a fresh cigarette after wasting several matches. Then he began. The words came falteringly at first, and then in an increasing rush.

"It's hard to know where the starting point is," he said. "I fainted one day as I was leaving my office. I'm president of Drake Aircraft. I put it down to the heat, or maybe a shrimp salad I'd had in the cafeteria for lunch. When I got home Marcia insisted I send for Bristow.

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"He took a serious view of it. Said I'd stretched my endurance to the limit and if I didn't rest and follow orders I was going to be good and sick. I made arrangements at the plant and then I gave up. I didn't realize how all-in I was till I quit working.

"Everybody was swell to me. I had eggnogs, and sat around in the sun and really enjoyed myself. Marcia's aunt and her brother Ted live here with us. Bob came in to see me every day and I seemed to be getting along fine."

He paused to inhale on his cigarette. The doctor had taken a place near the window and was looking out over the moonlit garden, almost as if he weren't hearing. Stephen couldn't see him in the gloom. He knocked the ash from his cigarette and went on. His voice began to be unsteady.

"It was Sunday morning . . . two weeks ago. We usually have breakfast on the terrace if the weather's fine. People drop in—like Bob, or Mike Cleghorn, an artist who lives next door, or other friends. That day it was Mike. After breakfast Marcia and Ted had planned to take two of the horses down to the jumping ring in the lower field for a workout. Cleg and I walked to the stable with them.

"I don't know why, but I didn't feel as well as I had for the last few days. I had a funny, pounding sensation at my temples. When we got to the stable George Meadows, the stableboy, brought out the two horses Ted and Marcia were going to ride. I was standing by Marcia's horse. She and Cleg were behind me, laughing together about something. Instinctively I lifted the saddle flap to see if everything was all right."

Stephen stopped. It seemed to be getting harder for him to speak.

"Go on, Mr. Drake," the doctor said quietly.

"I—I had the strangest kind of detached feeling, Doctor. I was looking at the girth and the buckles yet I didn't seem to know *why* I was looking at them. You know the feeling when you go into a room to get something and then can't remember what it is you're after?"

"Yes."

"Suddenly it all seemed to come into clear focus. It was a folded, leather girth and the stitching near the buckles was ripped loose. It was just held together by a fragment of the stitching. At the first fence I knew it would give way. I stood there, with the saddle flap raised, staring at the girth. My hands were damp and cold—

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like they are now. That thumping was going on inside my head.

"'Is it all right, darling?" Marcia asked from behind me.

"My mouth was dry and cottony. Some powerful force urged me to lower the flap, to say that it *was* all right, to let her ride down to the ring. I could see her galloping toward the first fence; I could see the big, gray hunter take off for the jump; I could see the girth give way and Marcia fall. She was lying on the turf and the iron-shod hoofs of the horse were coming straight down on her." The recollection of that vision stopped Stephen again.

"What *did* you do, Mr. Drake?" the Doctor asked.

Stephen let out his breath in a long sigh. "I called George. I pointed to the girth. Then I stumblingly went back along the path to the house. It was incredible, Doctor, but for a few seconds there I had been coldly, calculatingly considering the possibility of a fatal accident to Marcia. To have let her ride out on that faulty saddle would have been murder. *And I actually thought of doing it!* Only for seconds—but in those seconds it had seemed like an attractive idea."

The doctor made no comment. He sat looking out at the garden. After a long time Stephen went on.

"You'd have to know Marcia and me better, Doctor, to know how monstrous that idea was to me. I love her. She's my whole life. When we had to be apart for any reason I was miserable. If she was ever late for an appointment I'd get in a dither."

"Under the wheels of trucks," Dr. Smith said.

"What?" Stephen sounded startled.

"I said 'Under the wheels of trucks.' "

"How did you know?" Stephen asked.

"It's a common thing, Mr. Drake. You have an appointment with someone you love; they're late; so you begin to imagine that something's happened. Usually you imagine it's an accident. Was that how you felt?"

"Yes," Stephen said. His voice was very low. "I'd imagine she'd been in a taxi smashup, or, as you said, run over by a truck, or that there'd been a train wreck, if she was coming by train."

"Go on, Mr. Drake."

"Is all this so very odd, Doctor? Don't other people worry about someone they love?"

"It's not odd," the doctor said. "People worry."

"Well, after that business with the girth I was pretty sunk for a few days. Somehow I couldn't tell anyone about it. Bristow saw I'd

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had a setback, but I couldn't tell him about it. I kept twisting it around in my mind, wondering if I'd really meant to do it. But I *hadn't* done it. I managed to convince myself that it was all a fantasy—the result of being overtired and nervously keyed up. Then it happened again."

Stephen twisted and turned in his chair, tried to light another cigarette, and failed completely this time.

"About a week later I drove into town. I was driving for the first time since I'd been sick. Suddenly I noticed Marcia on the road ahead. Her back was to me. She was walking in the same direction we were going. She has a distinctive sort of swinging gait. Yippee, her spaniel, was galloping along ahead of her.

"Suddenly I felt that curious throbbing sensation inside my head. The road, the countryside, the figure of Marcia, seemed to blend into a kind of mist. I realized I was gripping the wheel of the car hard. Without any very clear thought I began easing the car over toward the right-hand side of the road. My foot pressed down on the accelerator and the car gathered speed.

"Inch by inch I turned the car in Marcia's direction until it was headed straight for her. The little nickel-plated figure on the radiator cap was aimed straight at her shoulder blades. There was a strange roaring sound in my ears, like a wind rushing past. I was almost on top of her now—fifteen yards—ten yards—faster—faster—"

Stephen's voice broke and he dropped his head forward on his arms. His whole body shook.

"Go on, Mr. Drake." The doctor's voice was totally without emotion.

After a moment Stephen lifted his head and went on. "Well, suddenly the fog was gone; the picture was clear. I wrenched the wheel to the left. I got a glimpse of Marcia's startled face as I swept by her, spraying gravel. I jammed on the brake and brought the car to a stop.

"I just sat there, gripping the wheel, that pulse hammering in my head. I was drenched with sweat. Marcia came up beside the car, grinning.

" 'Is that what you call "once over lightly" when you go to the barber?' she asked. She opened the door of the car, whistled to Yippee, and they both got in. 'Home, James,' she said. She didn't dream of what had so nearly happened."

The room was silent. The doctor evidently meant to make no

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comment. Stephen leaned back in his chair and pressed the tips of his fingers against his temples.

"The next twenty-four hours were the worst I ever spent," he said. "The experience on the road kept rolling over and over in my mind like an endlessly revolving mill wheel. I kept trying to explain it away. I remembered that explanation for the feeling people sometimes have in a strange place or strange situation—the feeling that they've been there before. It's supposed to be a momentary blackout of consciousness. You see the place, there is a blackout for a fraction of a second, and then you see it again . . . and it seems as though you must have been there before. It wasn't any good. That hadn't happened to me.

"I tried to explain it in terms of falling asleep for an instant. I'd done it driving at night and found myself over on the side of the road. But that hadn't happened either. There wasn't any escape from the truth. For a moment I'd meant to kill her."

"But didn't," the doctor said. "Go on."

"The worst part of it was that I suddenly felt separated from Marcia. I wanted to be with her, but I was afraid that something might go wrong again. I'd caught myself in the pattern twice. I kept staring at myself in the mirror to see if I looked the same. I thought I sensed a tension in the family's attitude toward me—as if they knew. It was just plain hell, Dr. Smith."

"But that wasn't the end of it?"

"No."

"You didn't tell Bristow?"

"Not then. You see I kept trying to explain it away to myself. After all I hadn't let her ride the horse, had I? I hadn't run her down in the car. It was all probably the result of being overtired, I kept telling myself.

"So, very slowly, like someone learning to walk again, after an injury to his legs, I began to feel my way back to normal." Stephen laughed. "God, that was certainly a fool's paradise."

The doctor remained silent.

"About four days ago, Doctor, Marcia wasn't feeling well. She had an upset stomach. She went to bed late in the afternoon. Cleg came over for dinner that night and he and Ted and Harriet and I had a pleasant evening. I went up to bed about ten. I was supposed to get plenty of sleep.

"When I got upstairs Marcia asked me if I'd go to the bathroom and get her some bicarbonate of soda. Of course I went. I opened

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the medicine cabinet. The soda is kept in a glass jar on the middle shelf. Marcia always empties it into the jar from its original package. I reached for the jar, took two teaspoons of the white powder, dumped them into a glass of water, and began stirring them. I put the jar back on the shelf. I turned and started for the bedroom."

Stephen's voice began to shake. "I'd only take a couple of steps when I realized that it *wasn't* soda—that I'd seen clearly the large POISON label on the jar. That I'd gone right ahead as though—as though I hadn't seen it. I dropped the glass and it smashed into bits on the bathroom tiles. I'd caught myself again, Dr. Smith."

"What was poison doing in the soda jar?" Dr. Smith asked.

"It wasn't the soda jar. It was one just like it. Marcia had handled some poisoned parsnip while she was working in the garden. This stuff was used to make a skin lotion. Bristow warned us it was deadly if taken internally. Marcia put it in a jar like the soda jar, but she marked it clearly, and it was kept on the top shelf, out of reach, where no one could get at it by accident."

"Who put it in the soda jar's place?"

"We've been having a general house cleaning, Dr. Smith. A woman from the village, a Mrs. Lilley, had been helping our own maids. She evidently cleaned the medicine cabinet. I suppose she didn't remember which bottle went where. But you see what it meant to me? I've been prepared to take advantage of any opportunity to do Marcia harm."

"That's open to argument," the doctor said. He got up and came over to the desk. His square, undistinguished fingers rested on the edge of the desk. "Did you finally tell Bristow?"

Stephen nodded. "The next day. He asked me the same question you did about the soda jar. He didn't seem to take it very seriously. God, if he only had, he might be alive now."

"Perhaps," Dr. Smith said. "Perhaps not. What happened tonight?"

Stephen fumbled with a match for a new cigarette. The doctor quietly lit one and held it for him.

"You know about the Conroy child?" Stephen asked.

"Yes."

"Well, Bob and Mike Cleghorn were here late this afternoon for a drink. Marcia came back from a meeting with the news about the boy. A little later Ted, who'd been on a long ride, turned up. When he heard about the boy he said he'd seen a kid over near

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Lookout Trail. He wasn't sure whether it was the Conroy kid or not. I know that trail, Doctor. We climbed it hundreds of times when we were kids. At the top of the trail are the ledges. They're dangerous, particularly at night. I thought we ought to go look for the boy. We all went in the car—the whole family plus Mike Cleghorn and Bob."

"Yes?"

"We left the car at the foot of the trail and started up, calling to the boy. There are several secondary paths and we split up, each taking different ways. Finally we all met on the ledges. There was no trace of the boy." He stopped, his hands clenched on the desk in front of him.

"What happened then, Mr. Drake?"

"Well, there was no point in staying there. We decided to take a short cut down. It's a narrow, steep path. You have to walk it single file. We were all gathered at the head of the path when it happened."

"What happened?"

"Bob went over."

"What did you have to do with it?"

"I must have pushed him."

"You *must* have pushed him!" The doctor's voice was suddenly sharp. "Don't you know?"

Stephen shook his head wearily. "As he was falling he said, 'Stephen, what have you done?' "

"What! The man was falling and he said that to you?"

Stephen nodded.

"Didn't he cry out?"

"After that he screamed."

"But before he screamed, and while he was falling, he said to you, 'Stephen, what have you done?' "

"Yes."

The doctor turned and walked over to the French windows. He stood there a moment and then came back. The desk light showed a curious brightness in his eyes. "Did you have the same symptoms, Mr. Drake? Throbbing in the temples? Things fading into a mist?"

"I don't remember them."

"And why did you push him? What motive did you have?"

"None. But there was no motive to harm Marcia."

"And you're positive he spoke those words to you?"

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"I'll go on hearing them as long as I live," Stephen said.

Again the doctor walked the length of the room and back. He stopped in front of the desk facing Stephen. "I don't believe a word of it, Mr. Drake," he said.

Stephen pulled himself up out of his chair. "But, Doctor, I tell you I—"

"I don't mean I think you're lying, Mr. Drake. I mean I don't think you pushed him. I don't think he said those words to you. And I don't think you would have harmed your wife."

A pathetically eager look came into Stephen's face. "Then you think it was an accident?" he asked.

"No." Dr. Smith said. "I think it was murder."

Stephen lowered himself back into his chair. He was staring at the doctor with a kind of hurt bewilderment, as if he thought the small gray man was playing games with him.

"There's a good deal of the story you haven't told, Stephen," the doctor said. He used the first name, simply, casually.

"But I've told you everything."

"Not really. But we're not going to go into it tonight. There are other things I have to know before we can make sense out of this. I'm going to give you a sedative so you can sleep. In the morning we'll see where we're at."

"There's no explanation for it except that something's given way in my mind, Doctor," Stephen said.

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you, Stephen. There are several other explanations. The problem is to find the right one."

The doctor had brought his bag from the car. It was on a chair by the door. He opened it and took a bottle of tablets from it. "Take two of these, Stephen. You'll sleep. Don't try talking to anyone tonight."

Stephen took the tablets, got to his feet once more, and moved slowly to the door. "You're not making it easier by telling me that I'm all right, Dr. Smith. Because, you see, I know I'm not."

"I didn't say you weren't sick, Stephen," the doctor said. "I said I couldn't agree that there was anything wrong with your mind."

"I don't understand, Doctor."

"Get some sleep," the doctor said. "You're too tired to understand."

The doctor stayed in the study for some time by himself. He walked back to the window and stood there, looking out. Evi-

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dently he wasn't visible from the door, for when Walsh appeared he looked in and was about to turn away when the doctor spoke to him.

"I didn't see you there, Dr. Smith," Walsh said. He came across and sat down beside the doctor. He lit a cigarette and inhaled contentedly. "I guess you got Stephen talked out of his crazy notion?"

"What crazy notion?"

"That he pushed Dr. Bristow off the ledges."

"I tried to. I don't think I was too successful."

"Well, it's a closed case," Walsh said. "A damned unfortunate accident."

"I don't agree, Captain," the Doctor said.

"What do you mean?"

"Bristow was murdered."

"Doctor! You're off your nut!" Walsh said. "You don't mean Stephen sold you that bill of goods?"

"No."

"Then what do you mean, Bob was murdered?"

"It's a simple Anglo-Saxon word, Captain. I mean someone pushed him off the ledge. But not Stephen. Stephen was meant to *think* he had."

Walsh just sat there in amazed silence. "Do you feel all right, Doctor?" he asked finally. "Who do you think did push him?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Not yet."

Walsh laughed. "I'm afraid I can't go along with you, Doctor. Where's your evidence?"

"Evidence?" the doctor turned his gray eyes out toward the garden. "If you mean physical clues, Captain, I haven't any. No cigar butts or fingerprints or blunt instruments. And Bristow's body won't tell you anything. It's broken to pieces."

"Then what is your evidence?"

"The unconscious testimony of a disturbed mind, Captain Walsh."

"For God's sake, Doctor!"

"Not in your line, is it, Captain? Well, it happens to be my profession, the study of disturbed minds. I want to tell you a story. Stephen Drake's story. See what you make of it."

The doctor began retelling the story he'd heard. Somehow his monotonous, lifeless voice actually added tension to the telling in the semidarkness. He told about the saddle girth, the car, the

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poison jar. When he had finished this part of the story Walsh whistled.

"Boy, he's worse off than I thought! Maybe he *has* gone nuts!"

"I want to tell you his story of what happened tonight. It will be interesting to see if it checks against what the others told you."

He told Stephen's version of how they'd started out, how they'd climbed the trail, separating on the way, and finally joined on the ledges. He told how they'd decided on the shortcut down, the gathering at the head of the path, and Bristow's fall.

"That's exactly what they told me," Walsh said.

"Is that all they told you?"

"What else is there?"

"Only that Stephen says Bristow spoke to him as he was falling. Did none of the rest of them hear him?"

"They didn't mention it," Walsh said. "Bob spoke to him?"

"He said 'Stephen, what have you done?' "

"Now wait a minute, Doctor! Bob said that to Stephen?"

"As he was falling," the Doctor said dryly. "Try to picture it, Captain. Stephen pushed Bristow. I can imagine the doctor saying 'Stephen, *stop!*' or 'Stephen, *what are you doing?*' I can't imagine his saying 'Stephen, what have you done?' as he fell. But that's just an oddity, Captain. It's not evidence. However, if someone wanted Stephen to think, in his disturbed and overwrought condition, that he *had* pushed Bristow, saying 'Stephen, what have you done?' would implant the idea in his mind, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose it might. But—"

"That's what happened, Captain. *Someone else* said it, and Stephen, in his confused state, thought it was Bristow."

"That's just guesswork, Doctor!"

"But accurate, I suspect."

"I'm afraid, Doctor, this whole thing is too fancy for me."

The doctor walked over to the desk. He picked up a round glass paperweight and showed it to Walsh. "What does this make you think of, Walsh?"

"Why, papers, bills, things that might blow around."

"Exactly. But suppose you were thinking of murdering me. Mightn't this heavy glass paperweight look to you like a weapon? You could crush my skull with it."

"Sure, I suppose I might think of it that way," Walsh said.

"What I'm getting at is this, Walsh. If you saw a ripped saddle girth you wouldn't think of it as a murder weapon, would you?

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Nor do you think of your car as a murder weapon. Nor would you think of skin lotion as a murder weapon. Not under ordinary conditions."

"Of course I wouldn't."

"But Stephen Drake *did*!" the doctor said. "That can only mean an impulse toward violence was there. He saw the girth, the car, the poison bottle, as instruments for murder."

"God, he must really be batty!" Walsh said. "But if he is, then maybe he *did* push Bristow."

"I doubt it. I've got to know a lot more about him than I know now, but I doubt it. Captain, we all have certain associations or experiences that turn loose in us impulses toward violence—sometimes directed against persons we love. We usually conceal these impulses from ourselves or control them. It's like a volcano in the mind. Fortunately, these associations or experiences don't take place often enough to jeopardize our control. If they did, the volcano would erupt and blow us to kingdom come. I think that's what's been happening to Stephen."

"I don't get it," Walsh said.

"I think he's been subjected to some kind of pressure that's been driving him along the path toward murder," Dr. Smith said. "But I don't think this pressure is there by accident. Somewhere in his past are experiences that evoke violent and aggressive impulses toward his wife. I think someone has been calmly and deliberately playing on this neurotic weakness of his. That weakness has been accentuated by his physical breakdown. I think someone has been trying to drive him to murder Mrs. Drake."

"Dr. Smith! Do you realize what you're saying?"

"Perfectly, Captain. I'm saying that someone in his household, or some close friend who knows the whole past history of his association with his wife, had been using that knowledge to bring about a murder. I suspect that all Stephen's life one of these people has hated him and waited for a chance to destroy him.

"It's a clever person. It's a person who's had an opportunity to study his weak spots for years and who's been prepared to take advantage of that knowledge when the right moment came. His sickness provided that moment."

"But he *didn't* kill his wife!" Walsh protested.

"Precisely. That's why I say he isn't insane. He resisted the impulse three times! He finally went to his friend Bristow for help. Those are the actions of a sane man, Captain."

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Walsh shook his head dazedly. "It's a fantastic theory, Doctor. You're saying that someone in this household is a vicious, scheming murderer who was trying to use Stephen as a kind of puppet to do his dirty work!"

"That's exactly it," Dr. Smith said.

"But it didn't work!" Walsh said. "Nothing's happened to Marcia. She didn't get pushed over the ledge. It was Bristow!"

"Bristow, who knew the story," Dr. Smith said in his flat voice. "Bristow, who saw his patient falling apart in front of his eyes. Bristow, a brilliant doctor who undoubtedly came to the same explanation for these experiences that I have.

"But he knew more than I do. He knew these people. He was able to check back. Again it's a guess, but I suspect he'd come on the answer and was on the verge of exposing the would-be murderer. So he got pushed off the ledge. That's the motive, Captain. Bristow had found the answer to Stephen's problem."

"No," Walsh said sharply. "I can't swallow it, Doctor. You're saying that Marcia or Ted or Harriet Moore or Mike Cleghorn is the biggest damn villain on earth! It's not so. I know them."

"Do you, Captain?"

"The whole thing is just a theory. There's no proof," Walsh said.

"Are you so ready to believe in coincidence, Captain?" the doctor asked. "I can't accept as coincidence the fact that whenever the impulse toward violence is roused in Stephen, the means for committing murder is always at hand. He has the impulse, and there is a broken saddle girth! He has the impulse, and there is Marcia walking ahead of his car! He has the impulse, and there is poison in his hand! One of these might be coincidence. All three of them I just can't accept."

Walsh just sat there, shaking his head from side to side.

"If a man is in an angry argument with his wife, Captain, and has the impulse to strike her, it's not very dangerous in a physical sense. She may get a black eye or a cut lip. But if he's fixing a fire and has an iron poker in his hand, then the impulse *is* dangerous. If he strikes her with the poker he may kill her. So he checks the impulse. But if every time thereafter he gets angry with his wife he finds he has a poker in his hands, the chances of his murdering her in the long run become very great, I'd say. That's what's been happening to Stephen. Every time the impulse toward violence arises he finds the poker in his hand! I say it's not by chance, and I think I can prove it."

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"How?"

"If that girth stitching didn't break by accident, then we'd know he was meant to find it, wouldn't we? If the cleaning woman didn't misplace the poison jar, then we'd know it was misplaced on purpose, wouldn't we? Would that convince you, Captain?"

"Maybe," Walsh said.

"There are two parts to this murder mechanism," Dr. Smith said. "The first part is to prepare the booby trap—the saddle girth, the poison jar—the poker, in short. The second part is to apply pressure to Stephen's neurotic weakness. It's really a beautiful device. The impulse is stimulated in Stephen, and then he's brought face to face with the booby trap. It calls for artistry and perfect timing."

"But it didn't work," Walsh said stubbornly. "We can't hang anyone for something that didn't happen!"

"Bristow's in the morgue," Dr. Smith said coldly. "That's real enough, isn't it, Captain?"

"Yes, that's real enough," Walsh conceded.

"His death proves my theory, Captain. We can follow it up or we can let it go. If we let it go, the murderer will bide his time and then I can almost promise you that you will find yourself investigating another fatal accident involving these charming people."

Walsh struck a match for a cigarette. The flame showed his face, drawn and tired. "Maybe *I'm* crazy, Doctor," he said, "but you've sold me. Where do we start?"

Ted Hunter was at the portable bar making another round of drinks when Walsh and the doctor came in from the study. Marcia was sitting on the couch, her head resting against the back, her eyes closed. She had just come downstairs from seeing if Stephen had everything he needed. She seemed to be suffering from an exhaustion almost as great as his.

Harriet was still at her sock. Mike Cleghorn was standing by Ted, ready to pass the drinks.

Walsh walked over and stood with his back to the fireplace. The doctor gravitated toward a bookcase in the corner and was apparently disinterested in the whole gathering.

"Drink, Jim?" Ted asked the Captain.

"No, thanks."

Ted's eyebrows rose in a mocking expression. "I think I detect

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n official pronouncement coming on."

"I've been talking with Dr. Smith," Walsh said. "He's convinced ıe that this thing isn't as simple as I thought. I'm afraid Bob idn't fall by accident."

The whole room seemed suddenly suspended in air. Harriet's nitting needles stopped abruptly. Ted stood, a bottle in one hand, glass in the other. Mike Cleghorn had struck a match for his ipe and the flame burned slowly down till it scorched his fingers nd he dropped it. Marcia's eyes were wide open, fixed on Walsh.

"Oh rot!" Ted said. He tilted the bottle, and whiskey poured nto the glass. Very slowly Harriet's needles began to move again. Cleg struck another kitchen match on the sole of his shoe and uffed steadily on his pipe to get it going. Only Marcia remained ıs she was, her tension unbroken.

"Dr. Smith believes Stephen's statement?" she asked in a low oice.

"No," Walsh said. "He thinks one of *you* pushed Bob off the edge."

It was a second bombshell. This time everyone turned to look at he doctor. His back was to them. He seemed absorbed in the ti-les of the books on the shelves.

"That's not all," Walsh said.

"It's enough!" Harriet said sharply. "What kind of hysterical alk is this?"

Walsh went doggedly on. "Bob was murdered because he'd un-overed the plans for another murder."

Ted threw back his head and laughed. "Here we should have a orty-piece orchestra rushing into the *William Tell Overture!* Of all the hogwash!"

"You're serious, aren't you, Jim?" Cleghorn said.

"Dead serious, Cleg. Stephen has told the doctor a story that we just can't toss overboard and forget."

"Stephen!" Ted said. "Stephen's nuts!"

"If he is," Walsh said gravely, "someone here is directly respon-sible. Someone here has been working on Stephen. The object seems to have been to drive Stephen to kill Marcia."

"Oh, my God," Ted said disgustedly. He turned toward the small gray man. His mouth was drawn down in an ironic smile. "What are you, Dr. Smith, one of these fancy Viennese dream in-terpreters?"

The doctor turned. "There are no dreams involved, Mr. Hunter.

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There has been a very real, diabolical, and vicious scheme in operation, though. Bristow found out about it and one of you had to get rid of him before you were exposed."

"My dear Doctor—"

"One of you has been trying to destroy Stephen Drake," the doctor said. "To destroy his mind, to smash his life, and possibly to bring about the death of Mrs. Drake also. It's about as ugly a scheme as I've ever come across in my career. That man asleep upstairs has been slowly and deliberately driven to the brink of murder. One of you is responsible."

Ted turned to the others. "The man's crazy!" he said.

"He quite evidently believes what he's saying," Harriet said in her crisp, dry voice. "Let him finish, Ted."

"I won't be finished, Miss Moore," the doctor said, "till I've done the job Bristow set out to do. And I can promise you not to be as careless as he was."

"Let me get this straight," Cleghorn said. "You're accusing one of us of trying to drive Stephen crazy so that he would murder Marcia?"

"Something like that, Mr. Cleghorn."

"I think," Cleghorn said slowly, I'll go home. I don't know who you are, Dr. Smith. I don't know what brand of hashish you've been smoking. But I know I don't have to take this kind of wild accusation from you or anyone else. I advise the rest of you to follow the same course. And I suggest, urgently, Marcia, that you get another doctor for Stephen."

"Sit down, Cleg," Walsh said.

The big artist towered over the State Trooper. "Are you saying that as an officer of the law, Jim?"

"Yes."

"And on what grounds are you restricting my freedom?" There was slow menace in Cleghorn's voice.

"I'm investigating a possible murder, Cleg," Walsh said. "If necessary I can hold you as a material witness. You were present when Bob was pushed off the ledge."

Cleghorn exploded. "Who the hell says he was pushed? Are you letting yourself be mesmerized by this quack pill peddler? So Stephen's off his nut and made some crazy statement. Is that proof of murder?"

"There seems to be a simple answer to this," Ted said. "We find out from an authoritative source just where we stand." He crossed

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to a telephone on a small table in the corner. "Woodfield 60," he said to the operator. The others waited in silence, watching him. "Hello, Malcolm? Ted Hunter here. Look, Walsh has gone off his trolley. He's decided Bob's fall wasn't an accident. On the evidence of a jerk doctor who's spending a holiday here. What . . . oh . . . Well, you're the County Attorney here. I thought . . . "

There was a long pause and then Ted said in a drawling voice, "You all seem to be going in for voodoo! You can count on me to vote for your opponent at the next election. Be seeing you."

He put back the receiver. He walked slowly back to the portable bar and poured himself another drink. "It seems, my dear family and friends, that we are in what is known as a box. It seems that Jim and the doctor here have already talked to Malcolm, from the phone in the study. It seems Malcolm is sold too."

He turned his ironic smile on the doctor. "And finally it seems that we owe Dr. Smith an apology. He turns out to be an eminent psychiatrist. It seems he's worked on several murder cases with the New York police. He is, in short, a celebrity. Malcolm wouldn't dream of disputing any of his theories. However, you don't mind, Doctor, if I go on thinking you're completely cuckoo, do you?"

"I don't mind, Mr. Hunter."

"So you'd better sit down, Cleg, and I'll make you another drink," Ted said. "It seems the noble Captain is quite within his rights to hold us all."

The clock on the study desk showed 1:45 in the morning. A faint chill had crept into the night air, and the French windows were closed. Marcia Drake sat in the chair to the right of the desk. Walsh sat behind the desk. Dr. Smith again had evaporated into the shadow. Marcia's hands were locked tightly in her lap.

"I'm afraid I don't understand any of this, Jim," she said. "I've known that something was wrong with Stephen, particularly for the last two weeks. But when he says, and you seem to believe him, that he's wanted to—to do me some harm—"

"It's a tough spot, Marcia," Walsh said gently. "I think you've got to remember that Stephen hasn't been himself. He was physically sick and when someone began to play games with him he didn't have the strength to fight back."

"But he had enough," Dr. Smith said. "He fought back and he finally went to Bristow for help. It takes more courage to fight

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what seems to be a fantasy than it does to fight a flesh-and-blood enemy."

Marcia was silent, staring down at her hands.

"Dr. Smith wants to know about Stephen. You seem to be the person to tell him, Marcia," Walsh said.

"What do you want to know?"

"Who is Stephen Drake?" the doctor asked in a dull voice. "What kind of person is he? What kind of life has he lived?"

"What I tell you will be biased," Marcia said. "You see, I happen to love him very much."

"I hope you do, Mrs. Drake," the doctor said. "He's going to need it."

"You want me to begin at the very beginning?"

"At the very beginning, Mrs. Drake."

She didn't speak for a moment. She seemed to be searching back in her mind for just the right starting point. "I think you have to know about my father," she said. "He was Nicholas Hunter—a very great artist. You may have noticed some of his paintings hanging in the entrance hall. This was his house. Ted and I were both born here. My mother died when I was only a year old and Aunt Harriet came to live with us—to run the house for Father and bring up the children. She was Mother's sister.

"Father was an extraordinary man. He was big, vital, and noisy. He had a bright-red beard. He used to barge through the village, pounding people on the back, arguing about local politics, and feeding candy to any stray kids who happened to be around. He had a gargantuan sense of humor, earthy and a little vulgar; but not like Ted who's inclined to needle you.

"Father was always shouting and stamping around the house. But he was a paradox. Rough and gentle; stormy and calm as a millpond. We called him Saint Nick. I think it came from his playing Santa Claus at the village tree one year. You have to know about Saint Nick to account for Stephen."

"I guess everyone loved your father, Marcia," Walsh said.

"Maybe Stephen loved him more than any of us. I sometimes think he did. You see, Dr. Smith, Stephen was a town boy. His father was the local handyman. His mother took in sewing. There was no money. Then Stephen's father went into the army in the First World War and was killed at Belleau Wood. His mother died a year later, and the local authorities dressed Stephen in his best Sunday suit, packed his belongings in a straw suitcase, and

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brought him to the depot where the train would take him to the state orphanage.

"He was sitting on the straw suitcase crying—because he was afraid—when Saint Nick happened along. He saw Stephen and stopped to ask him what the matter was. Stephen says he knelt down and put one of his big hands on Stephen's shoulder. When Stephen got through telling his story, Saint Nick took him and the suitcase, chucked them both in his car, and brought Stephen home with him.

"I remember Ted and I were playing upstairs. Ted was eight. I was six. We heard Saint Nick come in and slam the door. We heard him bellow.

" 'Where the blue blasted blazes is everyone? We've got company!'

"Aunt Harriet appeared from somewhere and we heard Saint Nick say Stephen had come to stay. Aunt Harriet asked him if he'd adopted Stephen.

" 'Adopted him, kidnaped him, call it what you like!' Saint Nick said. 'A public institution's no place for a boy to grow up.'

"So Stephen came to live with us. He adored Saint Nick. He followed him around like a little spaniel puppy. I'm afraid Ted and I and the rest of the kids were a little snooty at first. Stephen was awed by the house, by the fact that there are six bathrooms, by the stables and the swimming pool. We took all those things for granted and thought he was a little queer." She glanced at Walsh, a little shyly. "We were a pretty snobbish lot, weren't we, Jim?"

He smiled. "I used to think so," he said.

"But Stephen grew up as one of us," Marcia said. "In addition to us there were other kids. Cleg and—and Bob." Her voice broke. "I just can't believe what's happened tonight. I can't believe it's real. Bob was so vital, so alive."

"Please go on, Mrs. Drake," the doctor said.

She looked over at the window but he was only one of the shadows. She went on slowly. "We lived that way for ten years, and then Father was killed. It was an airplane accident. A big commercial plane struck a mountainside in Pennsylvania. Ted and Stephen were eighteen when that happened. I was sixteen.

"Well, things happened. Unbelievable things to us. There was no money. Saint Nick had been living to the limit of his earnings. We had to sell this house, the cars, the horses. When that was done and the debts had been paid there was almost nothing.

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Enough to start me in college. The boys and Harriet insisted that I take the money for that. They were going to work their way through school. Harriet found herself a job in New York.

"It was harder for Ted and Harriet and me than it was for Stephen, I think. He'd always considered his being with us was some kind of miracle. When it ended he was perfectly willing and content to face the problem. We were bewildered and totally unprepared. It had never occurred to us our way of life would ever change. I guess it showed in the results.

"Ted never could quite make it. He flunked out of medical school. He flunked out of art school. He couldn't seem to get adjusted to the idea that he was on his own. I did a little better than that. I got through college and found myself a job modeling for a photographer. But Stephen—Stephen was miraculous.

"He earned a scholarship his second year in college. He'd gone in for mechanical engineering. He worked in an airplane plant in the summers. Maybe it's crazy, but I think he had a passion for making better airplanes—planes that wouldn't kill the Saint Nicks of the world so needlessly.

"After college he became a plant superintendent. All the time he'd been designing an engine of his own. He got someone to back him and formed his own company. Two years later he hit the jackpot—big contracts, money, success."

"He never quit for a minute," Walsh said.

"We were all proud of him—terribly proud," Marcia said. "He gave Ted a job in his plant, but Ted couldn't make it there either. I don't want to give the wrong impression of Ted. He was brought up to school horses, to run a big place like this, to live in leisure, gracefully. These things he does well. Isn't that so, Jim?"

"Best man on a horse I ever saw," Walsh said.

"Well, one day Harriet, who has a small apartment in town, asked all of us for Sunday breakfast. It was a beautiful Sunday. Stephen suggested we go for a ride in his car. We started out and presently I realized he was heading toward Woodfield. I didn't want to come back here. It was hard enough as it was. I didn't want to see all the places and things I'd grown up with.

"When he turned in the driveway of this house I—well, I remember I thought I couldn't take it. He drove up to the door, and there was Mrs. Crandall who'd been our housekeeper in the old days. That was too much for me. I remember Stephen put his hand over mine.

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" 'Don't cry, angel,' he said. 'You see, it's ours again.' "

Marcia's voice broke as she told it. Neither of the men spoke and finally she took up the story.

"He'd bought it back," she said. "Big places were a drug on the market and the banks had it. He'd taken weeks to get things restored just the way they had been. There were even horses in the stable! I can't tell you what it was like. Stephen expected us all to settle down and live there. I think it was his way of paying us all back for what Saint Nick had done for him. Of course it didn't make sense—our living off him. But it was so clear he would be deeply hurt if we refused—and we were so weak-minded—" She laughed. "And we wanted to stay here so much. . . ."

"It seems natural enough," Walsh said. "After all, it was your home."

"Stephen's home," she corrected him. "Well, about six months later he asked me to marry him. I'd begun to think he would never get around to it again."

"Again?" the doctor asked sharply.

"I—I don't know why I said that," Marcia said. "It wasn't real the first time. It was a long time before—when I was fifteen and he was seventeen. I'm afraid I laughed at him that time."

"Laughed at him?"

"It was all a mix-up," Marcia said. "Cleg had done his first picture—a mural over the bar at the country club. There was to be a big party for the unveiling. Cleg had asked me to go with him and I'd accepted. But somehow Stephen had the idea that I was going with him. I don't remember how the confusion came about, but I *do* remember Stephen's face when I told him I was going with Cleg. It turned out he'd planned to propose to me that night. He'd prepared a speech."

She smiled. "We were here, in the study, when I told him I wasn't going with him. I guess, since he'd memorized the speech, he decided to get it off his chest anyway. It—it was terribly stuffy, and pompous, and—and now that I recall it—sweet."

"But you laughed at him," the doctor said.

"You see, Dr. Smith, he was more like a brother then. I'd never thought of him romantically. Oh, I knew he felt different from the way I did, but it seemed funny at the time. It was pretty cruel, I guess."

"But it worked out all right," Walsh said.

"It worked out perfectly—until two weeks ago."

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The doctor twisted round to look intently and directly at her. "I'm a little confused about time, Mrs. Drake. Stephen was eighteen when he went to college. Four years of that, a job as plant superintendent, then his own company. He must have been twenty-eight or -nine when you were married."

"Twenty-eight."

"And you were twenty-six."

"Yes."

"You're a very beautiful woman, Mrs. Drake. You must have had other beaus—other chances to marry."

Walsh laughed. "She had the whole town by the ears!"

"I had other chances," Marcia said seriously. "Cleg and Bob were my most persistent suitors. I think in those early days I thought I'd marry one of them. Then, when the collapse came, we got separated. Bob was at medical school. Cleg went abroad to study art. I—I think I was waiting for them when I became conscious of Stephen."

"Conscious of him?"

"As a man, Dr. Smith. I'd thought of him before as a brother, as part of the setup of my life. I began to feel different. I began to see his worth, his quality."

"It wasn't gratitude that made you marry him?"

"Gratitude?"

"For the house—the re-establishing of your life in its old terms?"

"No," she said quickly. "He had everything that could make a woman happy. Courage, vision, warmth . . . I loved him, Dr. Smith. I love him now with all my heart."

"You haven't felt it was a mistake?"

"No!"

"You haven't wished you had married Cleg or Bob?"

"I wouldn't change anything—except the mess we seem to be in now." She leaned forward. "Dr. Smith, what does it all mean? What is this talk about murder? What did Stephen mean when he said he'd been close to killing me?"

"Just that, Mrs. Drake. He has been close. Very close."

"I don't understand it! What have I done to make him feel this way? How have I failed him?"

The doctor ignored the question. He seemed to be lost again in the darkness.

"There are some questions about Stephen's trouble," Walsh

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said. His tone suggested it was difficult for him to be impersonal.

"Of course I'll tell you anything I can, Jim."

"There was a Sunday, two or three weeks ago," Walsh said. "Cleg was here for breakfast. You and Ted were going riding. You all went out to the stable together—you and Stephen and Cleg and Ted."

"You mean the day Stephen found my saddle girth was broken?"

"Yes."

"What about it?"

"Would you say, Marcia that about marked the beginning of Stephen's behaving queerly?"

She sat there frowning. Walsh held out his pack of cigarettes and she took one. He flipped on his lighter for her.

"I hadn't connected the two things," she said. "But—yes. It *was* about then things started to go wrong."

"Do you remember the day you were walking to the village and Stephen caught up with you in the car?"

"Do I remember!" She laughed. "He nearly took off my hide. He—"

"We know about it," Walsh said. "How did he behave after that?"

"Jim!" she sounded startled. "You mean those things—?"

"Were the close shaves," Walsh said. "Those and one other."

"But of course! After that day in the car Stephen seemed to change completely. He avoided me. He's been sleeping in another room under the pretext that he was restless at night. He refused to go for walks with me. I—I thought I'd done something to make him angry. He wouldn't talk about it."

"Did Dr. Bristow notice the change in him?" Dr. Smith interrupted.

"Yes. He was very concerned. He said the physiological tests he'd taken didn't account for it. He asked me a lot of questions about things that could have upset Stephen."

Walsh hesitated, then said, "Four or five days ago you were sick, Marcia. You went to bed sometime during the afternoon. I suppose people dropped into your room to see you?"

"Of course. You know Harriet. Stephen was in and out, naturally. Cleg came over for dinner and he and Ted came up to say, 'Hello.' "

"Tell me, Marcia, what did you take for your upset stomach?"

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"Bicarbonate."

"You took some when you went to bed in the afternoon?"

"Yes."

"I understand you keep it in a glass jar on the second shelf of your medicine cabinet."

"That's right," Marcia said. "This all sounds very clinical!"

"Was that jar in its proper place when you fixed the soda for yourself?"

"Why—why, yes."

"Did you take more soda later?"

"Really, Jim, I don't see what this is all about."

The doctor stirred near the window. "It's about murder, Mrs. Drake," he said.

The room was very still for a moment after that. Then Marcia said, "Yes, I took another dose. Stephen fixed it for me when he came up to bed."

"But he had an accident, didn't he? He dropped the glass?"

"Yes. It slipped, I suppose. He had to get another glass."

"And he didn't say anything to you about why he'd dropped the first one?"

"No. He seemed very upset again. He muttered something about being clumsy."

Walsh glanced at the doctor.

"What he didn't tell you, Mrs. Drake," the doctor said, "was that someone had switched the jars in your medicine cabinet. The jar with the poison for your hand lotion had been put in place of the bicarbonate jar. Stephen had mixed you a dose of medicine that would have killed you. It was when he realized what he'd done that he dropped the glass."

"But who would have switched the jars?"

"We'd very much like to know that, Mrs. Drake. If we did, we'd know who's been trying to drive your husband out of his mind. Can you help us?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. The family were all in and out. Cleg was here before dinner. Besides, there's a door to the bathroom from the hall. I dozed during the afternoon and evening. It could have happened—"

"Any time," the Doctor said wearily.

"I get a curiously mixed impression of Stephen from talking to him myself and from listening to Marcia," Dr. Smith said.

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Walsh stared disconsolately at an empty package of cigarettes. The doctor walked slowly across the room and then back again, to stand by the desk.

"Here's a man of great confidence, ability, and drive when it comes to his work," the doctor said. "He's really the perfect picture of what we call a 'self-made man' in our society. He had a boost that helped him, but it was his own quality and character that carried him through. But somehow I have the notion that he wasn't so certain or sure of himself in his personal life. They must have raised the devil with him as a child. I don't think he was ever allowed to forget where he came from—and made to feel there was something a little shameful about it."

"His family were good people," Walsh said. "They were poor, but they were good people."

"To some people, Captain, poverty is a kind of sin. Did you get the impression from Marcia that she and Ted and Harriet were really a little ashamed when they found there was no money?"

Walsh crumpled the empty cigarette package and threw it into the wastebasket. "It's an interesting observation, Doctor, but has it anything to do with our problem?"

"It has *everything* to do with it," the doctor said. "Here we have a man—Stephen Drake—who loves his wife, is apparently blissfully happy in his home, and successful in business. This man suddenly discovers that he has a violent impulse to do his wife harm. Where does that impulse come from? From his life today? They don't quarrel. Everything has been perfect until this began. No, Captain, we have to go back into the past to discover the starting point of those impulses."

Walsh looked incredulous. "You mean something he was sore about when he was a kid would affect him now?"

"I do," the doctor said. "We hide our emotions of anger, of violence, because they don't seem worthy or decent. *But they're there!* Take Marcia's story about the first proposal. She laughed at him. She ditched him to go to a party with Cleghorn. How do you suppose he felt then?"

"His feelings were probably pretty badly hurt," Walsh said.

"Poppycock," the doctor said impatiently. "That's the way we explain those things to ourselves. He probably told himself his feelings were hurt—*because it would have frightened him to admit to himself he felt like beating her brains out!*"

Walsh just stared at the small gray man.

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"Our conscious explanation of how we feel when somebody does us a wrong or an injury is always inclined to be noble, Captain. We say our feelings are hurt, or we feel disappointed. But down deep inside we have a good old-fashioned primitive urge to commit mayhem! And that anger smolders and smolders there, carefully hidden through the years. When we are reminded of the experience we dutifully remember that we felt hurt or disappointed, but actually the emotion of anger stirs again. That's what's been happening to Stephen."

"I'm not sure I get it," Walsh said.

"All these people—Marcia, Harriet, Ted, Cleghorn—know Stephen's life inside out. They know when he was hurt, when he was disappointed. *Somebody knows that on these occasions he was really angry.* Suppose he was casually reminded of that proposal—of Marcia's laughter, of her walking out on Cleghorn's arm. The same anger he felt then would stir inside him now. And suppose at that very moment—to use our example—he finds a poker in his hand. It would take a conscious effort to subdue the impulse to use it."

Walsh nodded slowly. "So our murderer revives these old angers—and then confronts Stephen with the saddle girth, the car, the poison jar. Stephen really has to make a decision, doesn't he? He really has to decide *not* to take advantage of them, doesn't he?"

"That's exactly it," the doctor said. "It's my job to find out what happened immediately preceding these experiences. What took place? Who was he talking with? How were these old angers stirred? Your job is more practical."

"That's a comfort."

"Check that saddle girth. I'm making a bet it was deliberately made unsafe. Try and piece together, if you can, the movements of these people in relation to the switching of the soda and the poison jars."

Walsh stood up and stretched. "There are really only three of them we have to check—Ted, Harriet, and Cleg. Marcia can't be involved in this. She was to be the victim."

"I'm afraid I can't agree to eliminate her as a possibility," the doctor said."

"What!"

"Look, Captain, Stephen's a good provider, isn't he? He's kind and generous. I suspect he's faithful to his wife. Do you think he'd

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let Marcia go to another man if she asked for her freedom?"

"No-o," Walsh said slowly. "No, he'd probably raise hell."

"I suspect Marcia knows that," the doctor said. "Suppose she would like to go to her first love, who seems to have been Cleghorn—or anyone else? She has no grounds for acquiring her freedom from Stephen. But if she could trick him into an act of violence, *for which she was prepared*, she might avoid its consequences and have evidence on which any court in the land would set her free."

"But the danger to her?"

"What danger? Suppose that was *her* scheme. Suppose Stephen had followed his impulse to say nothing about the broken girth. She mounts the horse and starts down for the ring. She pretends uncertainty about something, dismounts, and discovers the girth herself. She doesn't have to take the fall. And Stephen is on the spot!"

"Good God!" Walsh said.

"Suppose Stephen *had* brought her the poison? She doesn't have to gulp it down. She smells it. There's something wrong with it. It's poison. Then she runs screaming to the nearest judge and announces that Stephen has twice tried to do away with her. It would be almost fool-proof."

"What about the car?" Walsh asked. He was obviously grasping for some straw that would upset this distasteful idea.

"Do you know, Captain, or do I know whether she actually jumped clear at the last minute? She could have without Stephen's noticing it in his state of mind. The point is, if this *is* her scheme, it has only failed because Stephen has stubbornly resisted falling into the trap."

Walsh brought his fist down on the desk. "It's crazy, Doctor. Why wouldn't she just come out with it, say she was sorry but the marriage hasn't worked?"

The doctor was silent for a moment, then he said, "Hasn't it occurred to you, Captain, that this place—this house and all that goes with it—is a symbol of security to all these people? They grew up in it. It was their home, their base, the *safe* place to be. I don't think you could pry one of them loose from it—even Cleghorn. But it belongs to Stephen! Marcia couldn't leave Stephen and still have this house—this place of safety. And it means as much to all of them as it means to Marcia. You heard what she said. Ted belongs here. It's been Harriet's home for

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thirty years. Cleg is in and out like a member of the family."

"You mean the desire to possess this house is the motive behind all this?"

"In a way, Captain. What this house represents is the important thing—security and safety to someone who is desperately insecure and unsafe."

It was 6:30 in the morning. Walsh drove his car up to the door of the Parker cottage in the village. He was heavy-eyed and looked a little like a man with a bad hangover. Dr. Smith came out of the house and got into the car. He looked as he always did.

"Three hours' sleep is worse than none," Walsh said. He started the car and headed for the Drake place.

"How well you sleep is what counts," the doctor said. "Not that I recommend three hours as a standard ration."

"I had nightmares," Walsh said. "It's funny what a thing like this does to you. I had a kind of fixed notion about these people. You know—pleasant, charming, living the kind of life everybody would want to live. Suddenly they're all out of focus. One of them is a killer—a vicious killer."

"One of them is a very sick person." the doctor said. "Murder is a sickness, Captain."

"I keep hoping somewhere along the way something will happen to upset the whole theory," Walsh said. "It's not that you aren't convincing, Doctor. It's just that—damn it, I like them all!"

"Perhaps you'll be lucky," the doctor said. "Tell me something about this stableman we're going to see."

"George Meadows? He's a local man. Not overbright, but wonderful with horses and completely trustworthy."

"That last is an odd description for a man who would send out a horse with a faulty saddle. Unless I'm right, of course."

"Right about what?"

"Most grooms check their equipment when it comes *in* from a ride," the doctor said. "They saddle-soap it and get it ready for the next outing. They do their checking then. If he saw it was all right then, he'd have no reason to notice it particularly the next time it went out."

"That's probably what happened, because George is careful and reliable."

"In that case, you see, our murderer had plenty of time to tamper with the girth. Also, I guess that it was Stephen's habit to

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walk out to the barn with Marcia and to do his own checking. So the murderer could count on his finding it."

"George will clear things up," Walsh said.

They turned in the iron gates of the Drake place and swung off the main driveway down the road to the barn. The big sliding doors were open and they could hear the horses stamping and whinnying inside. They stopped and got out. There was no sign of George Meadows and the horses made a great clamor as they got closer.

"Sounds as though they hadn't been fed," Walsh said, frowning. "George usually feeds them around six."

They stood in the doorway. The doctor could see the horses' heads looking out over the tops of the boxstall doors. But Walsh wasn't looking at horses.

"Holy Joe, what struck this place?" he said.

It certainly wasn't the picture of a well-kept stable. Blankets, coolers, pieces of harness were scattered all over the floor. Two tack trunks stood with their lids open and the doctor saw that the lock on one of them had been forced.

Walsh went quickly into the barn. To the right of the entrance was the tack room. There was a half-glass door. The room itself was long and narrow, with saddle racks and bridle hooks lining one wall. The pleasant smell of saddle soap and tar greeted them. There was a potbellied stove at one end of the room. At the other was a cot, covered by a bright green-and-white-checked horse blanket. On the cot a man lay. The whole place was the same disordered mess as the main part of the barn.

Both Walsh and the doctor hurried to the cot.

"Dead drunk," Walsh said.

"If you can get drunk by being hit over the head with a tire iron, he's drunk," the doctor said. He pointed to a steel bar on the floor. Then his fingers explored the wound on the side of George Meadows' head. It was long and ugly-looking. George's hair was matted with blood.

"He's alive," the doctor said after a moment, "but that's about all. My guess is a bad fracture. It's an emergency case. Can you get an ambulance here at once?"

"There's a phone somewhere here in the stable," Walsh said. He located it out near the front doors. When he came back, the doctor was standing beside the cot, looking down at Meadows.

"This fellow slept here?"

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"Sometimes. His family lives on the edge of town. If he didn't feel like going home, or was kept late, he bedded down here."

"He made an unlucky choice last night," the doctor said. He looked around him. "There was panic involved here—panic and great need for hurry."

"Somebody was certainly looking for something," Walsh said.

"They certainly were, Captain. They were looking for a saddle girth! I'm afraid they found it. Probably in that locked trunk."

"Why would it be there?"

"Maybe Meadows had ideas about it too," the doctor said. "Unfortunately he isn't going to be able to tell us about it soon—if ever."

"It's that bad?"

Dr. Smith nodded.

The ambulance arrived about half an hour later. The hospital was in the neighboring town of Kingsford, about twelve miles away. From the intern on the ambulance Dr. Smith got information about a staff surgeon. He called the surgeon on the phone and told him what to prepare for.

"Quite apart from the man himself," Dr. Smith said, "his survival is important for other reasons. If he regains consciousness, be sure to have someone get what he says, and if he can be questioned, try to find out exactly what happened."

As the doctor turned away from the phone he saw Ted Hunter coming on the run down the path from the house. He'd apparently put on only a pair of pants and a shirt. He had bedroom slippers on his feet, and his blond hair was disheveled.

"What the hell's going on here?" he demanded. He stared at the mess of equipment on the barn floor. Then he turned toward the tack room. The intern and the driver were carrying George Meadows out on a stretcher. Walsh followed the stretcher out of the tack room and Ted grabbed his arm. "What's happened here?"

"Our murderer is getting a little less subtle," Walsh said.

The Drake household had that strange look of being caught unaware. An unshaved, unmade-up kind of unawareness that makes for self-consciousness. Harriet had on some sort of gray thing that was best described as a wrapper. Her dark hair was drawn back severely from her face, revealing streaks of gray that were hidden by her normal coiffure. Marcia had on a pale-blue linen housecoat. There was no color in her cheeks and her eyes

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were shadowed. She reminded Walsh of a very tired little girl. Ted had lost some of his usual mocking composure. He kept lighting one cigarette after another.

They were sitting around the big table in the dining room. A maid brought coffee and eggs and toast. Walsh had sent one of his men, who'd come out from the State Troopers' barracks, to fetch Mike Cleghorn. After the first breaking of the news no one had done much talking.

Stephen was still sleeping heavily as a result of Dr. Smith's tablets. The doctor had suggested letting him sleep.

"To me this whole business at the stable is entirely senseless," Harriet said. "Why should anyone attack George?"

"That part is simple enough," Ted said. "Whoever it was was looking for something. They turned the place upside down. But for what?"

"A saddle girth," Walsh said.

"A saddle girth!"

"A ripped saddle girth," Walsh said. "The one that was on Marcia's saddle two weeks ago. Dr. Smith and I went there to find it ourselves. Somebody beat us to it. George evidently interfered."

"I don't think he interfered," Dr. Smith said. His expressionless, gray eyes moved slowly from face to face. "I think he was asleep. I think the person who wanted the girth slipped quietly into the tack room and slugged him with the tire iron without giving him any chance at all. There were no signs of a struggle—only frantic haste in searching."

"Not a pleasant picture," Harriet said. "But will somebody please tell me what is so important about a broken saddle girth?"

"It's evidence in the case," Walsh said. "I hoped it might prove Dr. Smith was wrong. Now I know he's right."

"And would you mind telling me what a broken saddle girth has to do with Dr. Smith's idiotic theory that someone's been trying to drive Stephen crazy?" Harriet asked.

"No, I don't mind," Walsh said. He put it to them flatly, baldly, without frills or supporting argument. He put it to them as fact. He needed no more convincing himself.

Marcia listened, as though hearing the words from him made them more believable than when she'd heard them from the doctor. Harriet sat rigidly in the armchair at the head of the table, her hands clamped tightly over the knobs of the chair arm. Her lips were drawn together. She looked like a person set firmly to

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take a blow. Ted, too, seemed to be absorbing punishment. His color had faded; his cigarette burned forgotten in the ashtray beside his coffee cup.

When Walsh finished nobody spoke for a moment. Then Harriet said, "You ask us to accept this as fact?"

"It is fact," Walsh said. "One of you tried to drive Stephen out of his mind. One of you pushed Bob Bristow off the ledge. One of you smashed in George Meadows' skull with a tire iron."

There was an angry exclamation from the doorway. Cleghorn stood there. His hands were doubled up at his sides. "A pretty damned incompetent summing up, if you ask me," he said. He walked around the table to an empty chair. As he passed behind Marcia he touched her shoulder with the tips of his fingers.

For the first time some of Ted's familiar mockery returned. "Perhaps it should be pointed out that nobody *did* ask you, Cleg," he said.

"I don't give a damn whether they ask me or not," Cleg said.

"Will you have some coffee, Cleg?" Harriet asked.

"The hell with coffee!" Cleg put his big hands down flat on the table. He fixed his eyes on Dr. Smith. "I would like to ask you one question, sir. Just where does Stephen fit into this picture?"

"I should call him one of the victims," the doctor said.

"It's a very convenient explanation, isn't it, Doctor? Only I don't go for it."

"No?"

"No! You set up a picture here of a completely unbalanced person at work. A person so unbalanced as to murder Bob and attack George Meadows. You sit there and blandly accuse the four of us, who show no signs of any mental unbalance, and pass over Stephen who has obviously been ill for weeks! You base your whole theory on a story Stephen has told you—Stephen, who is clearly way the hell off base!"

"Is it your idea, Mr. Cleghorn, that mentally unbalanced people always go around gibbering and plaiting daisies in their hair?" the doctor asked.

"Of course it isn't!" Cleghorn said impatiently. "I just don't understand why, when you're dealing with insanity of some kind, you calmly pass by the one person we know is out of whack."

"Stephen couldn't have attacked George down at the stables," Marcia said. "He's been asleep. The doctor gave him something to make him sleep."

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"Sure. That's great," Cleg said. "Did anybody see him take the pills?"

"He obviously took them," the doctor said. "I've just come from examining him."

"Could you tell when he took them?" Cleg demanded. "Couldn't he have done this job at the barn first?"

"It's possible," the doctor conceded.

"Then for God's sake, let's approach this intelligently. You say someone was playing Svengali to Stephen's Trilby! And the object? To murder Marcia! We forget about Bob and George Meadows for a minute. They were afterthoughts, according to you. Bob had uncovered this fantastic business, you say. George was slugged, you say, because your villain knew you were going to look for a saddle girth that's evidence in the case. But your basic theory has to do with a fancy scheme for murdering Marcia. Right?"

"That's right, Mr. Cleghorn," the doctor said. The mildness of his manner seemed to increase Cleghorn's blood pressure.

"Well, let's look at that!" he said. "Let's say we're all nuts, just for the hell of it! What possible lunatic reason could I have for wanting Marcia dead?" He laughed harshly. "I guess it's not a secret from anybody that I've been in love with Marcia all my life."

"Cleg!" Marcia protested.

"This is getting really fascinating," Ted drawled.

"You're always so damned smartly smug, Ted," Cleghorn said. "I'm just stating facts. I love Marcia and always have. I lost out to Stephen and that was okay. She's been happy. But if I did go off my trolley I wouldn't be murdering Marcia. I'd be murdering Stephen."

"Perhaps you could call this oration a sort of murder by proxy," Ted said.

"Shut up, Ted. Let's take *you*!"

"By all means," Ted said, grinning. "I offer my beautiful body to the cause of science."

"Loopy as he might be, Ted wouldn't murder Marcia," Cleg said. "She's his direct route to three square meals a day, a comfortable home, and a life of leisure. You don't think Stephen supports Ted because he's in love with Ted, do you? Take Marcia out of the picture and Ted might actually have to rustle his own ham and eggs."

Ted's smile had frozen and his blue eyes were cold and angry.

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"Portraiture has never been your forte, Cleg. You ought to stick to landscapes. Do you deliberately pass over the fact that Marcia is my sister and that I might be fond of her?"

"Have you ever been fond of anyone but yourself, Ted?" Cleg demanded.

"Why, you jerk!" Ted said. Then he laughed, his good humor apparently returning. "I can't wait for your thumbnail sketch of Harriet."

"Give me one reason why Harriet would want Marcia out of the way?" Cleg said. "Just one reason! You're not going to tell me she secretly loves Stephen, are you?"

"This is your party, Mr. Cleghorn," the doctor said.

Harriet's face was expressionless. "I suppose I have the normal amount of envy any homely woman feels for a beautiful woman," she said. "I suppose I secretly wish I might have lived a full rich life with the man I loved, as Marcia is. Perhaps that could be called a motive."

"Rot!" Cleghorn said. "The simple fact is there aren't any motives, sane or insane."

"Go on, Mr. Cleghorn," the doctor said.

"That about covers all of us," Cleghorn said.

"What about Mrs. Drake?" the doctor asked.

"Marcia?"

"Yes."

"But she's the one who was supposed to get killed."

"That's the way it's made to look, at any rate," the doctor said. He outlined briefly his case against Marcia. As he finished, Cleghorn half rose from his chair.

"I ought to knock in your foolish little face," he said.

"Sit down, Cleg," Walsh said.

"The whole thing is fantastic," Cleg said. He made an effort to keep down the anger in his voice. "I'm not pointing at Stephen because I don't like him. I do. Besides liking him I have a great admiration for him. But he's worked himself to death at his job and he's had a crack-up. It could happen to anyone. The point is, he's not responsible. What gets me is that you base this whole cockeyed theory on *his* story! And you treat the rest of us, who are all perfectly normal, as though *we* were irresponsible. It's crazy! It's upside down!"

The doctor looked up from a design he'd been drawing on the tablecloth with a fork. "I'm afraid, Mr. Cleghorn, your approach

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and mine to what is normal and not normal are quite different."

"I don't like any part of this, Jim," Harriet Moore said.

She was sitting in an armchair in the study. There had been time to dress, and with the knitting needles moving in and out of her fingers she seemed more herself.

Walsh sat behind the desk. Dr. Smith stood over by the French windows, hands in his pockets, looking out at the sunlit garden.

"We don't any of us like it, Harriet," Walsh said. "But Bob is dead, George Meadows may die, and Stephen's whole future may be at stake."

"It's somehow like talebearing," Harriet said. "Those four are my children." She smiled. "The nearest thing I ever had to children of my own. I know them inside out, Jim—their weaknesses, their strengths. I know things about them no one else knows, not even themselves. Take Cleg, for instance."

"Yes, Harriet."

"That outburst of his in the dining room. Surely it was clear to you what he was up to? His loyalty, Jim, is the very core of his existence. He listened to your explanation and he had to find an answer that would clear us all. It wasn't himself he was trying to defend. It was all of us."

"Not Stephen," Walsh said.

"Stephen too," Harriet said. "We've all been trying to tell ourselves that this was a wild theory. But there's no escaping the reality of the attack on George. So we have to admit *someone's* responsible! Stephen, in his condition at the moment, can't be held accountable. Cleg wasn't turning on Stephen. It was simply the least catastrophic explanation."

"I see."

"You and the doctor are being quite frightening," she said. She half turned her head but she couldn't see the small gray man without moving round in her chair. "It's like being in a room where the walls are slowly closing in on you. Cleg feels it, just as I do. He's trying to fight his way out, that's all. We all know that the answer to this thing is going to smash our comfortable little world. Naturally we resist the idea."

The doctor spoke from behind her. "But you accept the fact that it must be true, Miss Moore?"

"I have to accept it," she said quietly.

"Then help us," Walsh said. "You say you know these people.

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What goes on beneath the surface? How do they really feel about each other?"

Harriet bent over her knitting for a moment. "Marcia is the simplest of the lot to explain," she said. "She was a normal, healthy girl. As a child she had everything in the world she wanted, and it didn't seem to spoil her unduly. She was Saint Nick's favorite. When we went on picnics she always rode with him on the front seat. Being a girl she got extra presents. I think sometimes she got away with murder when there'd been mischief afoot. Saint Nick was always perfectly willing to believe her innocent. I know she loved her father deeply, but she wasn't above using her favored position with him to get special advantages."

Harriet looked up. "If I make her sound scheming and tricky I don't mean to. I'm trying to draw you a picture of a very understandable, human, usual child."

Walsh grinned. "I didn't think she was average at the time! She was just about the most glamorous person I'd ever seen."

"I don't think she and Ted were ever conscious of the fact that the lavish setting in which they lived made them any different from anybody else. They took it for granted. Marcia had lots of beaus, but I think she explained this, quite properly, on the grounds that she was attractive—not that there were horses and swimming pools and parties. I don't think she ever thought about that phase of it until Saint Nick died and we were all confronted with actual poverty."

"How did she take that?" Walsh asked.

"She took it with her chin up," Harriet said. "I knew she was bewildered and frightened, but she never let on. She went through college, got herself a job. She weathered it."

"And the boys?"

"Stephen was magnificent. You know that."

"And Ted?"

"You have to know Ted as I do to understand him," Harriet said. "I never agreed with Saint Nick's theories about how the boys should be brought up. He led them to expect that what they had as children they would always have. I think he believed it—and Ted, at least, believed *him*. It was almost as if Saint Nick had double-crossed him when he died and there was no money. I don't mean he was resentful. But it was as if he'd believed in something—almost like a religion—and then discovered that it wasn't true.

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"He's never fully recovered from it. It accounts for his mocking, ironic approach to everything. He always makes fun of any real emotion, or any substantial qualities in other people. I think it's because he's afraid to believe in them—afraid he'll be double-crossed again. It's because he hasn't been able to get adjusted, to find anything to hang on to, that he failed in medical school, failed in art school, and you might say failed in the business of living. It isn't because he hasn't got it in him. It's simply that he's afraid to trust anyone or anything."

"You're very fond of Ted, aren't you, Harriet?"

"Aren't we always fondest of the ones who need us the most?"

"And Stephen?"

Harriet drew a long breath. "I never knew anyone who didn't like Stephen," she said. "I had doubts when Saint Nick brought him into the household as a child. He came from different stock, from a different stratum of society. I didn't think he could be set down in what to him was a sort of Arabian Nights dream and not be spoiled. I was wrong. Everybody who knows him knows I was wrong."

"How did Stephen get along with the others?" Walsh asked.

"He was a kind of curiosity at first," Harriet said. "They all knew the dingy little house he'd lived in down by the railroad station. They suspected he was different. They laughed at his wonderment over this place. Sometimes they were carelessly cruel. But in the end they accepted him completely as one of them. I'm not talking only of Ted and Marcia, but of Cleg and Bob Bristow and the other children. I watched the thing closely in the beginning because I wondered if Ted and Marcia might not resent his sharing their life—the things they thought of as theirs."

"And did they?"

"I don't think so. I never saw a sign of it."

The doctor turned round from the window. "You were really in the position of a mother to these children, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was."

"Did *you* resent Stephen's sharing their lives—and the things they thought of as theirs?"

She looked up at him sharply, hostilely. "Why should I?"

"It wouldn't have been unnatural," he said. His voice was gentle. "A mother usually wants everything she can possibly lay her hands on for her children. You might have felt that Stephen was an intruder."

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She hesitated a long time. "I'd like to be honest," she said. "I don't think I did. I may have been doubtful about how it would work, but I don't think I resented him. Later I came to owe my whole life, my whole security to him."

"When did Marcia fall in love with Stephen?" the doctor asked.

"I don't know," Harriet said. "I always thought she would marry Cleg, or possibly Bob Bristow. I never thought of Stephen as a possibility. I knew how he felt about her. You had only to look at him when she was present to know how he felt."

"And you were surprised when she accepted him?"

"Yes. Frankly, I thought she'd made a mistake. Not that I didn't think Stephen was fine—but I didn't think she loved him. I thought—well, his buying back the place and setting us all up here—I thought she'd mistaken gratitude for love."

"And now?"

The needles stopped their clicking. Harriet kept her eyes fixed on the gray wool sock. "I think she loved him. I think she would die for him." She hesitated. "I've tried to be coldly rational about your murder theory, Doctor, but I simply can't accept the theory that Marcia may be back of it."

"Ted or Cleg, then?"

"No!"

"That leaves you, Miss Moore."

Her lips tightened. "That leaves Stephen," she said. She lifted her eyes. They were somehow tragic. "Cleg is right. It's the only answer, Doctor."

"I don't see that this is getting us anywhere," Walsh said, when Harriet had left the study.

"Don't you Captain?" Dr. Smith took the chair Harriet had vacated, and sat there, making a bridge with the tips of his fingers. "This is an interesting case from a police point of view. No one saw Bristow being murdered, though five people were in touching distance of him. No physical clues there or in the slugging of George Meadows. But there's evidence, nonetheless, Captain."

"I wish I could see it," Walsh said.

"It's more a matter of *hearing* it, Captain. A murderer may leave no physical evidence, no material traces of his crime, but he can't erase the clues to murder that are in his mind. We've been listening to those clues, and when we have them all assembled, we'll have enough to point definitely to the killer."

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"You mean you're making some sense out of all this?"

"Definite sense. There's only one thing that bothers me."

"You're lucky," Walsh said dryly. "Everything about the whole damned case bothers me."

"The thing that bothers me is the business of the stable," the doctor said. "The slugging of George and turning the place upside down doesn't fit in with the rest of the picture."

"How come?"

"You really said it yourself at the time, Captain. You said the murderer was getting less subtle. Remember?"

Walsh nodded.

"It was a shrewd observation," the doctor said. "Up to then we'd been dealing with a person who was playing delicately with the balances of a human mind. When murder became a necessity, in Bristow's case, it was still handled with finesse. No clues, no untidiness. But the thing at the stable is completely out of character. Here we have the reverse of everything shown in the earlier stages—open violence, panic, hysterical haste."

"The murderer didn't want us to find the girth," Walsh said. "When he realized we were after it he had to move fast."

"If the girth would have convicted our murderer, Captain, why was it left around until the last minute? There have been two weeks in which to get rid of it." The doctor leaned forward. "And remember this, Walsh. That girth wouldn't have convicted anyone; all it could have done was prove our theory for us. Why does this calm, resourceful, keen-minded killer suddenly lose his head and risk everything to find that girth?"

"They all make mistakes," Walsh said.

"But this mistake is out of character," the doctor repeated. He sat scowling at the toes of his shoes for a long time. Then he roused himself. "Let's have Ted Hunter in, Captain. He may tie up some loose ends for us."

Ted came lounging into the study from the entrance hall. He had shaved and his blond hair was slicked down. He had on a blue polo shirt and a pair of beautifully cut, cavalry-twill fatigue britches.

"All hell has certainly broken loose, hasn't it?" he said. "That was quite an exhibition Cleg put on in the dining room." He turned a straight-backed chair around and straddled it, his arms resting on the back. He flicked the ash from his cigarette on the

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carpet. Walsh slid an ashtray across the desk in his direction. Then he looked at the doctor.

"It's your show," he said.

"Really, Doctor, I'm quite frightened," Ted said. "You fellows who deal with psychiatry always scare the pants off me. I don't like to be seen through, Doctor."

"You're not alone in that feeling," the doctor said. "You know, it would be easier if we could be direct, Mr. Hunter. But I'm afraid indirection fascinates you."

"Why do you say that?" Ted asked.

"My observation of you, Mr. Hunter. Your humor is of the oblique kind. You slide the needle in from the side."

Ted laughed.

"You pretend to be casual and unaffected by anything," the doctor said, "but you betray the fact from time to time that things touch you quite deeply. For example, when Cleghorn suggested that you were a chiseler."

A muscle rippled along Ted's jaw. "Now take it easy, Doctor."

"Just proving my point," the doctor said.

Ted relaxed. "I guess anybody would get a little sore at that kind of suggestion."

"Especially if it's true," the doctor said in his colorless, unemphatic way.

"Now look!" Ted said, half rising from the chair. Then he laughed again and sank back. "You're pretty adept with the needle yourself, Doctor. Okay. Let's go ahead—as directly as you like. No holds barred."

"Very well, Mr. Hunter. Did you push Bob Bristow off the ledge?"

"No," Ted said, smiling.

"Did you slug George Meadows with that tire iron?"

Ted's smile broadened. "No. Ask me something hard, Doctor."

"Have you always hated Stephen Drake?" the Doctor asked, without altering his tone of voice.

"Hey, slow down!" Ted said. "Who says I ever hated Stephen?"

"I just asked," the doctor said.

The two men's eyes met in a steady look. "All right, Doctor, no holds barred," Ted said. "There were times I hated Stephen's guts." He said it without passion. "I hated him when he first came to live with us. I've always been selfish and greedy. I didn't want to share with anyone. I found out I couldn't eat the whole

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Thanksgiving dinner myself, so I stopped hating him."

He grinned. "But not for good, Doctor. I hated him again later. I hated him for making good when I was pulling a colossal flop. But I got over it. Stephen never played the big shot. And that's the whole score on hating Stephen. Next question, please."

"You didn't object to Marcia's marrying him?"

"Object!" Ted laughed. "My dear Doctor, I was selling vacuum cleaners from door to door to a lot of disagreeable New York housewives at the time. Stephen offered me a salary to run this place, to school the horses. A salary plus board and keep! Cleg was right. Without the marriage that probably wouldn't have happened. Hell, I loved it when they got married."

"And you think they've been happy?"

"Being tied to one person forever seems to me to be a pretty dreary business. But if you like it, you like it. They seem to like it."

"No quarrels?"

"Cooing doves," Ted said. "Your little pipe dream about Marcia just won't wash, Doctor."

"Then you think, along with Cleg and your Aunt Harriet, that Stephen himself is responsible for all this?"

Ted shrugged. "What else *can* we think? It's tough. I wish it was the customary passing tramp—having it be Stephen may raise hell with my life! I'm comfortable here, Doctor. I don't want change."

"Why should it alter your life?"

"Well, if poor old Stephen goes off to the booby hatch—because that's where he'll go, they don't hang crazy people—I say, if he goes to the booby hatch, things might be upset here."

"Why?"

"Well, I mean—"

"Marcia would still keep the house, wouldn't she? There would still be money rolling in from the plant? Why should anything change? Do you think Marcia would kick you out if she were in charge?"

That muscle bulged along Ted's jaw again. He shook his head. "You certainly are fast on your feet, Dr. Smith. No. I don't think Marcia would kick me out."

"You're on good terms with her?"

"Perfect. Oh, from time to time she gets annoyed with me for being a louse. But not seriously annoyed."

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"So it wouldn't make any difference in your life, would it, if Stephen were to hang for murder—or be sent away to an institution for the criminally insane?" The doctor's gray eyes were fixed unblinkingly on Ted.

"No, I guess you're right, Doctor. It wouldn't make much difference in my life," Ted said. "I suppose this is what you might call 'letting my hair down.' "

"You're not a man of very deep affections, are you, Mr. Hunter?"

"Not very deep."

"There are just two more questions I'd like to ask you," Dr. Smith said.

"Shoot, Doctor. Your questions fascinate me."

"Do you think I'm a fool, Mr. Hunter?"

Ted stared. "That one really has me off base, Doctor! My answer? I don't know you very well. You have a good press, apparently. Malcolm thinks you're a mind reader. Or isn't that a compliment, Doctor?"

The doctor ignored the crack. "I have a second and last question, Mr. Hunter."

"Go ahead."

"Will you confess now?" the doctor asked.

"Confess to what?" Ted asked. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Plotting to eliminate Marcia and Stephen; the murder of Dr. Bristow," the doctor said casually.

"No can do, Doc," Ted said. He grinned broadly.

"That's all, Mr. Hunter," the doctor said.

Ted stood up. "It's been a very instructive session, Doctor. I always wanted to see a great psychiatric mind at work. I'm afraid it was a little disappointing. No rabbits pulled out of the hat, nothing up the sleeve. Strictly a Grade B production."

The doctor's tone was good-humored. "The script is still in preparation, Mr. Hunter. Give us time."

Ted went out through the open French windows to the garden. Walsh looked at the doctor. "Do you really suspect Ted?" he asked.

"It could be," the doctor said. "I think we know as much about this as we're ever going to know."

"That's great," Walsh said sourly. "What next?"

"We sit here, Captain, and sweat it out."

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An hour went by. The Drake household made no pretense of going about its normal routine. There was a subdued quietness about the place, as if they were all conscious of Stephen lying upstairs in his heavy, drugged sleep.

"I envy him those pills," Cleg said. He and Marcia were sitting on the open terrace at the east side of the house. The morning sun was hot, and there was a humid haze in the air suggestive of possible thunderstorms later in the day. Marcia had on a pair of black glasses to shield her eyes from the sun. She was stretched full length in a deck chair. Cleg sat beside her on the little stone parapet of the terrace.

"I'll never forget how he looked last night, Cleg," Marcia said. "It was as if he'd died inside."

"How long are the pills supposed to keep him under?" Cleg asked.

"The doctor said he should sleep around the clock. He went to bed at two. He should be awake soon, I guess."

"Damn him!" Cleg said. Marcia turned her head. "I mean the doctor," Cleg said.

"He's only doing what he thinks is right, Cleg."

Cleg fished in his pocket for his pipe and pouch. "I guess I'm not a moralist when it comes to a thing like this. Bob's gone. Nothing we can do will bring him back. In a way Stephen's gone, too. But he *can* be brought back with proper care and treatment. If the doctor had kept his mouth shut about this murder theory, Walsh and Malcolm would have passed the whole thing off as an accident. In the long run it would have been better that way."

"But if it wasn't Stephen, Cleg?"

"Darling, let's not kid ourselves," Cleg said. He scowled down at the bowl of his pipe, prodding at the tobacco in it with his forefinger. "I'm sorry about this morning. I'm sorry I said what I did—about how I—about loving you." He didn't look up. "You've always known it, haven't you?"

"Yes, Cleg."

"I've never pushed it, have I? We've been alone together a thousand times—when you've posed for me, riding together, walks. Have I ever pleaded my case, or tried to drive any kind of a wedge between you and Stephen?"

"No."

He looked directly at her, but the black sunglasses kept him from seeing anything she might be feeling. "I'm not pleading for

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myself now. I want Stephen to get well, to get back to normal. I want it because I know you love him and because it would make you happy."

"Yes," she said in a lifeless voice. "That would make me happy."

He stared at her, the pipe arrested halfway to his mouth. "Good God, Marcia, is it possible that *wouldn't* make you happy! The way you said it, I—"

"Cleg, stop it. Don't you see, unless this thing is completely cleared up, Stephen and I haven't got a chance? We'll always wonder if the smash could happen again; we'll always wonder if he *did* do it. That terrible reserve that's been between us since this began won't just melt away."

He ran a hand through his thick, brown hair. "Marcia, if there's anything in the world I could do to help, if there's any part of this you haven't told me and that you need help with, if talking would help to clarify it—"

"There's nothing, Cleg."

Harriet came out onto the terrace with a sewing basket. Cleg sighed and struck a match for his pipe. Harriet sat down in a wicker chair.

"What are they doing—Walsh and the doctor?" she asked.

"They're in the study," Cleg said. "Trying to figure things out, I guess."

"Yesterday at this time this was such a lovely world," Harriet said.

Ted came around the corner of the house, whistling an off-key tune. "Hullo, characters," he said. He sat down next to Cleg on the parapet. "Got to find somebody to fill in for George. It's a lot of work taking care of five horses. Any report on how he is?"

No one said anything.

"Don't let our mastermind get you down, chums. He doesn't know where he's at right now." He looked past them to the side door of the house. "Hold onto your hats, kids. It looks like the convention is about to reconvene."

Walsh came out of the house and stood looking back at the French doors. Just behind him was Dr. Smith—and leaning on the doctor's arm was Stephen.

Marcia got quickly to her feet and went to Stephen. He looked down at her with a small twisted smile. He seemed tired, almost beyond endurance.

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"It looks as if this were the payoff," he said in a voice that was almost a whisper.

"Come over to the big chair, darling. You mustn't stand," Marcia said.

"Darling . . ." He checked her, his hand on her arm. His voice was so low that only the doctor could hear him. "Whatever happens—whatever happens please believe I love you with all my heart."

"I know, Stephen," she said.

She and the doctor led him to the big chair and he sat down. A kind of embarrassment seemed to have fallen over the others. They murmured greetings.

"You're looking better, Stephen," Harriet said. "But should you be up? Isn't this asking too much of him, Doctor?"

Dr. Smith's face was, as usual, expressionless. "The best possible therapy for all of you is to settle this matter, once and for all," he said.

"You've pulled a rabbit out of your hat, Doctor?" Ted drawled.

The doctor turned away without answering, walked over to the far corner of the terrace away from the group, and sat down on the parapet. He bent forward, looking down at the irregular pattern of the stone terrace. Walsh stood in the center of the gathering, thumbing through the pages of a small notebook.

"Hear yez! Hear yez!" Ted said. "This court is now in session."

Walsh ignored him. "There are one or two points we can only clear up with all of you together," he said. "I want to try to recall something that happened two weeks ago—the day Stephen discovered Marcia's saddle girth had been tampered with."

"May I ask a question?" Ted said. There was a mischievous light in his eyes. "Has tampering been established, your Honor?"

"It doesn't matter," Walsh said. "You all had breakfast here on the terrace, I believe. What did you talk about?"

The question was completely unexpected. No one answered for a moment. Then Ted laughed outright. "I'm afraid the family conversation isn't so scintillating that we can remember it two weeks later, Jim."

"It's important to remember," Walsh said. "You were here, Cleg. Do you remember?"

"I remember something we talked about," Cleg said. "Me."

"Absorbing topic," Ted said.

"I'd just gotten word from New York," Cleg said, "that a gallery

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there was going to give me a one-man show. I came over to tell the family. That's how I remember. I was excited about it. I think I pretty well monopolized the conversation. It's to be my first show, you see."

"And that talk led to what?" Walsh asked.

"When an artist talks about himself," Ted said, "it never leads to anything but more talk about himself."

Marcia turned the dark sunglasses toward Walsh. "I remember we talked about Cleg's first public showing," she said. "I spoke about it when I was talking to you earlier—the mural at the country club."

"Lord!" Cleg said. "That was fifteen, sixteen years ago. We did talk about it, didn't we?"

"Who brought it up?" Walsh asked.

"It came naturally out of talking about this new show of mine—also a first." He glanced at Ted. "I think it was you, Ted, who asked if we remembered that unveiling at the country club when we were kids. God, I was eighteen and I thought I was a second El Greco in those days. I remember Saint Nick took my hide off for it. He thought it stank. He never kidded around about his opinions on art."

"I always liked that mural, Cleg," Harriet said, looking up from her sewing.

"You and the bartender at the club were the only ones."

"About that Sunday morning," Walsh said.

"It's funny," Marcia said, "but I remember it all quite well now. We had different reasons for remembering that unveiling. Cleg, of course, remembered it because he was making his first public appearance as an artist. I remembered it because I got mixed up on my dates, and because Stephen—because Stephen proposed to me."

"And you had laughed at him," Dr. Smith said unexpectedly.

"Yes."

"I remembered it," Ted said, "because I was in love with three girls and having a hell of a time keeping them all going at once."

"I remembered it," Harriet said dryly, "because Saint Nick couldn't find his dress studs and I thought he was going to take the house apart stone by stone."

Walsh waited. "And how about you, Mr. Drake," he said, turning to Stephen. "Didn't you take part in the conversation?"

Stephen had been sitting with one hand shading his eyes. He

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owered the hand and looked at Walsh. "Yes, I took part in it," he said, his voice very low. "I remembered being laughed at."

"Stephen!" Marcia said, as if he'd hurt her.

Cleg broke in quickly. "I remember I said something about wishing he'd given up then."

"You all went out to the stable after that?"

"Yes." It was Stephen who answered the question.

Ted flipped his cigarette away onto the grass. He looked across at Dr. Smith with an ironical smile. "I think I see where this is leading," he said. "You asked me a question a while back, Dr. Smith. You asked me if I thought you were a fool."

"Well?"

"I might ask you the same question. You're trying to indicate by this line of talk that *I* started the conversation that drove Stephen haywire. Is that supposed to be evidence?"

"It's a fact, at any rate," the doctor said. "That conversation definitely reminded Stephen of a very bad moment in his life—a moment when he was laughed at, made a fool of. A moment when the anger he'd felt in the past was recollected and revived. Just beyond that conversation the saddle girth waited for him."

Ted smiled blandly. "You mean that's how I'm supposed to have planned it?"

"That's how somebody planned it," the doctor said.

"Why, it's magic!" Ted said dryly. "Only I'm afraid that's all it is—magic. About the saddle girth, Doctor."

"What about the saddle girth, Mr. Hunter?"

"You see, I didn't slug George, Dr. Smith. If I was your man, I'd have known better. That girth is in the stable right now. I've had it in my hands this morning. Whoever was looking for it didn't know that George had it repaired the day after it was discovered. Call the shoemaker in town. You'll find he sewed it up for George." He shook his head. "If somebody was looking for the girth, they just didn't know their onions. It had long since ceased to be evidence."

Stephen raised his head. "It's no use, Dr. Smith," he said, in a harsh voice. "It's just another of the things I did without remembering—like pushing Bob."

"You remember everything that really happened, Stephen," the doctor said. "You're rattled now. If you stop to think you'll remember that *you* ordered George to have that girth repaired, that *you* checked with the shoemaker yourself."

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Stephen's eyes widened. "I did. I remember that . . . but . . . "

"What you remember, happened," the doctor said. "What you don't remember, didn't happen." He shifted his glance to Harriet. "Wouldn't it save time and trouble, Miss Moore, if you told us about your search for the saddle girth?"

Harriet was a motionless statue in the wicker chair. Everyone was looking at her. There was blank astonishment in Ted's blue eyes.

"Harriet!" he said.

She didn't look at him. "I don't know how you know, Dr. Smith," she said, "but it's true."

"Harriet!" Ted said again.

Her voice was almost inaudible. "I—I didn't mean to hurt George," she said. "I—I couldn't risk his waking up. I—I never struck anyone before in my life. I—" She stopped.

"But Harriet, *why*?" Ted said.

"Last night, when Marcia came up to bed she told me the doctor's theory. I—I understood from what she said that the saddle girth was—was evidence. I had to find it—to destroy it."

"Harriet!" Stephen said in a shocked voice. "You did this to protect *me*?"

"To protect this household," Harriet said without looking up.

"It's no use, Miss Moore," Dr. Smith said. "You did it to protect the murderer—because he was the person you loved most in the whole world."

"Please!" Harriet whispered.

"She did it to protect you, Mr. Hunter," Dr. Smith said. His voice suddenly held the deep anger of a sentencing judge. "She knew it was you who had been working on Stephen. She knew it was you who'd pushed Dr. Bristow off the ledge."

"That's crazy," Ted said impatiently.

"She was willing to protect you at any cost," the doctor said. "You were her son. None of the others mattered to her. I think she deeply resented the success and happiness that had come to Stephen and Marcia. She wanted the world for you; she wanted to be proud of you. You made it hard for her, Mr. Hunter."

There was no color in Ted's face. There was an unbelieving, dazed expression as he stared at Harriet.

"You have been going through life, Mr. Hunter, distrusting everyone, hating everyone because you felt there was no one on whom you could depend. All the time this woman, who was more

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mother to you than a mother might have been, was prepared to back you in anything. I think she has prayed for the day to come when she could be openly proud, openly happy. When she knew what you'd done she was still willing to go to the very limit for you. She misunderstood the significance of the saddle girth. She thought you'd slipped up. She tried to cover up for you."

Ted ignored the doctor. "Harriet, why did you think it was me?"

She shook her head. She couldn't answer.

"I'll tell you how she knew, Mr. Hunter," the doctor said. "She had seen it going on. She had watched you slyly, cleverly probing at Stephen. She didn't know then that the object in this was murder, but she knew you were trying to undermine his security, to make him doubt Marcia, to make him feel that he was an intruder in his own home. Because you never thought of this as his home, Mr. Hunter. You thought of it as yours! You felt that somehow Stephen had stolen it from you and that Marcia had helped him to do it."

"Ted!" Harriet said. "Oh, Ted!" She lifted her hands to her face.

Ted had turned toward the doctor. There was an odd, fascinated look in his eyes. The doctor continued in his monotonous voice.

"Your two years in medical school, Mr. Hunter, hadn't been a total loss. They'd given you some understanding of how the human mind works. You experimented, I suspect, at first. You found a way to make Stephen miserable. It was just a game. Then, when he became ill, it occurred to you that you could carry it further. You could get rid of him *and* Marcia and be completely clear of any kind of legal guilt.

"But you underestimated Stephen. He didn't know what was happening to him, but he fought. He fought the whole thing, stubbornly, fiercely. Finally, when he doubted his own strength, he went to Bristow. Bristow had probably seen the needling process in action, and now he could see where it really led. I suspect the first time he spoke to you about it was last night on the mountain. Am I right?"

Ted didn't answer.

"You and he got to the ledges first. He probably told you he knew what was up and that he was going to expose you. You had to do something then or never, so you did it. Even then you saw a way to implicate Stephen. At the same time that you pushed Bristow you said in Stephen's ear, 'Stephen, what have you done?'

"And poor Stephen, who thought no one but Bristow knew his

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secret, who still thought it was some kind of madness, believed it was Bristow who had spoken. If it had been anyone else, they'd have said more about it later, wouldn't they? So—he was convinced he had done it."

Sweat trickled down Ted's face. No one else seemed capable of movement. When the doctor hesitated, it was as if the whole world were suspended in space.

"And why did you have to get rid of Bristow?" the doctor asked. "He couldn't make a criminal charge against you. But he could tell Marcia and Stephen. You couldn't risk that, Mr. Hunter. You couldn't risk it *because it would have meant you couldn't live here any more*. That was the one thing in the world you couldn't face. Not to live here in this place that spelled safety and security for you would be to die.

"You were already committed to murder because you couldn't bear to share it. People meant nothing to you; people were to be distrusted. You had to have this place to be safe, have it all to yourself, shut everyone else out of it. Your plan to get it was a crazy, twisted scheme, but it nearly worked. Stephen would kill Marcia, and then Stephen would be hanged or sent away for life. They have no children. You are obviously an heir—you and Harriet. Perhaps if it had worked you'd have turned your attention to Harriet."

"No!" Ted said sharply. "Harriet! I meant it for both of us. I swear it. I meant for us both to be here forever. I knew you loved me and trusted me and believed in me. You were the only one."

"But she didn't trust you," the doctor said grimly. "She didn't believe in you. That's why she made the futile, hysterical attempt to find the saddle girth she thought was so important." He paused a moment. "That's the picture in broad terms. Shall I go on, Mr. Hunter?"

Ted didn't answer, but he got up, went quickly to Harriet's chair, dropped on his knees, and buried his face in her lap. Her thin, bony fingers stroked his hair.

"He never really had a chance," she said to them all urgently. "He never really had a chance."

Stephen and Marcia were left alone with the doctor on the terrace. Marcia sat on the arm of her husband's chair and their hands were tightly locked together. Some of the grayness had left Stephen's face. His anxiety now seemed to be for Marcia. She kept

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glancing up to a second-floor window to the room where Walsh was waiting for Ted and Harriet to get ready for the trip to the County Attorney's office.

"How did you know about Harriet and the business at the stable?" Marcia finally asked the doctor.

"The whole business at the stable bothered me," the doctor said. "It didn't fit the rest of the pattern. I kept trying to force it to fit. That was a mistake. When I gave up trying that, I saw the answer quite clearly. If it wasn't the murderer who had searched the barn and slugged George Meadows, then it had to be someone who was trying mistakenly to shield the murderer. There was one person in this house who felt that kind of protectiveness for Ted—Harriet."

"You always thought it was Ted?" Stephen asked.

"I had my choice narrowed down from the start. I had just two choices, it seemed to me. Ted and Cleghorn."

"Cleg!"

The doctor nodded. "He was the one who thought I was being—I think the word was 'incompetent'—in accepting Stephen's story in full. I've had a good deal of experience with neurotics and psychotics. I knew Stephen was telling me what he believed had happened. The facts didn't jibe with what he believed. I had to find facts that would fit—that would account for what Stephen believed had happened.

"The first thing that tended to narrow my choice was your account of Bristow's fall, Stephen. It seemed absurd to me that Bristow would have said 'Stephen, what have you done?' as he fell. But someone had said it, with the intention of planting the idea in your mind."

Marcia nodded. "I can see that."

"Well, it seemed to me just about certain that it must have been a *man* who said it," the doctor said. "If Marcia or Harriet had said it, I think even Stephen's confused mind would have been conscious that a *woman* had spoken. Instead of thinking Bristow had accused him, he would have thought Marcia or Harriet had accused him. The idea that it was Bristow wouldn't have taken root in his mind. So I told myself that it was Cleghorn or Ted."

"What tipped the scales toward Ted?" Stephen asked.

"The man's character and background," the doctor said. "Anyone might have had a knowledge of psychiatry sufficient to put this scheme in operation. But Ted's medical school background

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was suggestive. When a man fails to make a go of his life he usually imagines other people are responsible. This can develop into a first-class neurosis—a motive, in this case. His delight in stabbing at everyone's little weakness and foibles—all suggestive.

"I did consider Marcia and Harriet. Marcia might have been in love with Cleg, but I got the feeling she would be loyal to Stephen if it killed her. Harriet might have maneuvered the whole thing to get what she wanted for her precious Ted. But I had the feeling that an older person would not have known the way to strike at Stephen. It seemed to me it must be one of the children he grew up with, who would have been aware of intimate little things an older person would never have known about at all."

He stopped and took a large silver watch out of his pocket. He looked at Marcia with a tired smile.

"I'm going to leave you two together now. You've got a job to do—fitting the pieces of your lives into a new framework. But you can do it, because the danger is all over for both of you. There's nothing to be afraid of any longer."

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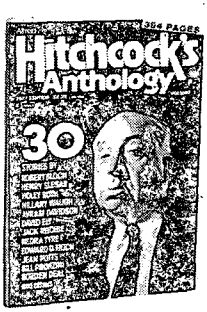

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Haskell Barkin

The Last Sassetta

Are you interested in restoration? Restoring antique furniture, perhaps? Old paintings? Vintage automobiles? Ah, you say you're a classic-car buff? That rebuilding an engine, replating chrome, refinishing wood, turns you on? Oh, you say you're not a fancier of early-model horseless carriages? It doesn't matter. You'll still be fascinated by this story of the rarest old car in the world, and of Mike Osmond's ultimate "labor of love" . . .

Three years ago Mike Osmond stumbled across the rarest car in the world.

His consuming interest in life was restoring classic automobiles to their exact original condition. To finance this he worked at a dull job that he loathed. He refused all offers of advancement which would make additional demands on his time, and he was unmarried.

One Saturday morning he left his home in Los Angeles for Winnemucca, Nevada. His current project was a 1930 Cord, and he had heard that a pair of front-wheel universals in almost perfect condition were available in Winnemucca. One way or another he would get them.

The address turned out to be a Gasoline Alley type of garage that looked as if it had been in business since Henry Ford got turned on by a conveyer belt. When Mike entered, his contact, an old-timer named Wilmer Butts, was setting the idle on a pick-up truck.

Butts was friendly enough and asked a fair price for the universals, which Mike haggled him down by one-fourth. Then Mike spent an hour picking the brains of the ancient mechanic for all the tricks of the trade and for leads to other antique parts.

As he was about to leave, Wilmer Butts said, "I seem to recall an old car rusting away up on Mother Lode Mountain that you might want to look at."

"What kind?"

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"Foreign, most likely. Damnedest long hood I ever saw, with the front seat open and the back closed in. I tried looking for a name somewhere, but there wasn't none."

"Any hood emblem? Any design on the hubcaps?"

"Come to think of it there was a funny-looking radiator cap. You'd call it a horse's head, except for the horn sticking out of the forehead."

Mike felt his stomach clench.

"You look like that means something," Wilmer Butts said.

"Kind of," Mike answered, forcing his voice to be calm. "Sounds like an old De Soto touring car a friend of mine's rebuilding, and he's going crazy trying to locate that ornament. Hell, maybe I'll pick it up for him. You say the wreck is abandoned?"

"Far as I know. It's government land. Used to be a gold-mining operation up there until 1931 when a fire shut it down completely. No great loss, the workings were just about dry anyway."

He told Mike how to get there—an hour's drive out of town and then 14 miles of dirt road up Mother Lode Mountain.

Mike raced along the state highway, taking maximum advantage of Nevada's lack of speed limits. It can't be, he thought as the needle tremored on 90. Nobody gets this lucky. Yet Wilmer Butts's description could fit only one make of car—a make that the richest men in the world regularly tried to add to their collections and couldn't.

A Sassetta.

Precisely 32 of these incredible automobiles had been produced in Italy between 1920 and 1924. Produced? Created!

Benito Sassetta was one of the greatest geniuses ever to design and build an automobile. His cars handled like racers. They rode like luxury liners. They had innovations in steering, suspension, and engineering that were 30 years ahead of their time. Some still haven't been duplicated.

His gearbox alone was a marvel. Shifting was so fast and easy that new drivers thought the factory had forgotten to connect the bottom of the lever.

All this was familiar to Mike. It was the stuff of his dreams. He knew that 32 cars had been sold to the world's wealthy, to its rulers. And then Benito Sassetta went insane. Maybe he was crazy all the time he was building his wonderful machines. Sane men know you can't possibly achieve the perfection Sassetta had aimed at—and had achieved.

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According to the Sassetta Society (headquarters, London), perhaps the world's most exclusive club because you have to own one to belong, 14 of the cars were now in the possession of presidents, sheiks, and other heads of state; 8 were owned by private individuals; 7 had been wrecked in accidents and by angry mobs; 2 were in museums.

And only one of the magic 32 was unaccounted for, Mike told himself over and over again.

Driving as fast as he dared, it still took him over an hour to snake up the mountain road. Twice, at hairpin turns, he almost went over the edge. Finally when he was high enough to see across the valley to the next range of mountains, he came to the burnt-out mine.

There was a gaping shaft with blackened timbers cut into the side of the hill. The landscape all around was littered with enormous machinery for crushing and shaking, with pumps, parts of donkey engines, and gears. A junkyard of rusting iron. Half a dozen single-story wooden buildings stood in various stages of dilapidation.

Mike sprinted to the long shack that Wilmer Butts had said was the bunkhouse. He turned the corner and came upon the ancient automobile, its hood crushed, headlamp askew, red finish burnt and scratched, and springs curling from the driver's seat. A silver unicorn reared up from the radiator cap, as if announcing to Mike that myths and dreams could, in the twinkling of an eye, become reality.

He circled the machine in awe. He opened a door and gazed inside at the moldering splendor of wood and leather. He tenderly rubbed a sleeve against the dull surface of a fender and uncovered a sudden depth of shine that threw the sun back at him like fire and brought tears to his eyes.

Somewhere behind him a girl's voice called out, "One of these days I'm going to chop off the top of that wreck with a can opener and plant geraniums in there."

Mike whipped around, angry at the interruption. Advancing toward him was someone in Levi's and a plaid lumberjack shirt. Her hair was in pigtails. As she came closer Mike saw that the girl was in her late twenties and more weathered than pretty. She held an ax, as though prepared to carry out her threat immediately.

"Who're you?" Mike demanded.

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"Well, for one thing I'm the owner of this property on which you're trespassing." Her voice had lost its friendliness.

"This is government land," he said.

"And they gave me a lease. Sorry I don't have it with me."

"Then all this is yours? These shacks?"

"Uh huh."

"And all the machinery and this old clunker of a car?"

"That's right."

This plain country girl was the most important person in the world to him. And his stupid anger had made her hostile.

"Look," he said, flashing the smile that had persuaded dozens of classic-auto buffs to sell him treasured spare parts, "I want to apologize for being a little gruff. But I thought I ripped my sleeve on the fender of this junkheap. Friends?"

"What're you doing up here?"

"I heard about the mine and the fire. I figured there might be a couple of old trucks up here I could cannibalize to get parts for a Cord I'm rebuilding."

"A what?"

"A Cord. It's a front-wheel-drive car. Sort of classic."

"We haven't got any trucks up here. Just this thing." She was a little friendlier now.

"What an ugly monster," Mike said with distaste.

"You think so? Seems kind of grand to me."

"You know what kind of car this is?"

"Some hunter said it was an old Packard."

"No, it's some short-lived mongrel nobody remembers. Cars like this were built for the new rich, to impress them. But it hasn't got any style, it's just a collection of standard parts. That's what makes the car so garish. Look at these fenders. They're Packard, all right, which is what fooled your hunter friend."

He opened the undamaged side of the long hood. It lifted silently and easily. Underneath, with its chromed exhaust pipes extending back on each side like wings, rested the great V-16 engine. Mike remembered what some owner had once written: "One does not speak while riding in a Sassetta; one listens."

"Why are you staring at the motor like that?" the girl asked.

"It's an engine. A motor is electric. And I'm staring because it's disgusting how they got away with such shoddy workmanship. Parts from everywhere. Ford, De Soto, Pierce-Arrow—nothing made to go with anything else."

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"You're quite an expert."

"It's a relaxing hobby. Even if it does get to be a little expensive for a guy like me."

A cowbell clanged inside one of the old shacks.

"That's Uncle Oscar," the girl said. "He likes to meet people. Want to come inside?"

Mike followed her into the shack. An old man in a wheel chair sat beside an enameled kitchen table. The cowbell was on his lap. One hand trembled.

"Who the hell you been talking to out there?" the old man said.

Introductions were made, then the girl, whose name was Annie, said to Mike, "Uncle Oscar used to work at the mine until the fire."

"Back in 1931," Uncle Oscar said in a sort of a gasp. "Damnedest thing you ever saw! One second I'm working at the shaker with the engine rattling in my ears. Next thing there's an explosion in the shaft and I don't hear nothing else. Deafened me, you know? Then there was flames everywhere."

He went on describing the disaster for half an hour, and then the operation of the mine. Mike played the perfect listener and asked interested questions. Finally he was able to say the important one.

"And that old wreck of a car, what was that doing up here?"

Uncle Oscar laughed and shook his head. "Belonged to the owner himself, Mr. Peacock. He was here visiting that very day. Happened to be in the shaft when it exploded. Anyway, I started clerking in a hardware store after that. But I still came up here every weekend for a little private prospecting."

"Any luck?"

"A couple of hundred dollars a year," Annie said. "Or about a nickel an hour."

Later, when Annie and Mike were outside, she said, "Since his stroke last March I drive him to the mine as often as possible. He loves it up here. I guess I do, too. No more prospecting, of course. Mostly he just sits and remembers."

"You know what? I like him, I really do."

She smiled warmly. Like a schoolgirl offering to show her doll collection, both proud and uncertain of being accepted, Annie suggested a tour of the site. Mike accepted enthusiastically.

Later they came to the old car again. Mike shook his head, as though still astonished that such a monstrosity could have been

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built. Suddenly he snapped his fingers.

"I'll be damned!" he said, and reached in to grip the steering wheel, that circle of wood that Benito Sassetta had fashioned from the beams of century-old farmhouses.

"Uh huh, that's a Chevy steering wheel all right," he said.

"Why is that unusual if the car is all different parts?"

"There's this old guy I know who's restoring a '25 Chevy, like the one he drove cross-country on his honeymoon. His wife died last year and he really misses her. So I guess he's trying to bring back memories, kind of like your uncle and this place. He's been going crazy looking for the right steering wheel, and here it is."

He paused to let her make the offer.

"Mike, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a draftsman." Can't you take a hint, stupid?

"Does your wife work with you on the Cord?"

"I'm not married. Say, I just got a crazy idea. Will you sell me this wreck? I can give Charley his steering wheel and make enough reselling the parts to do a little more work on my Cord. I don't know what to offer you. Does a hundred bucks sound fair?"

"The car isn't for sale, Mike."

"Why not?"

"Uncle Oscar is attached to everything at the mine. Especially since his stroke. Nothing new comes up here, and nothing leaves."

Sentimental value, eh? The girl was sharper than she looked. "Annie, I've got two hundred and four dollars with me. Cash. It's all I can afford, okay?"

"You sure doubled your price fast."

"Because I can understand how your uncle feels. And I can probably still make a little."

"If I hold out would you double the offer again?"

"That's all there is, Annie. And if my gamble doesn't pay off I live on beans for a month."

"I don't think you're playing straight with me. And I don't like being treated like some country bumpkin. Maybe you'd just better get out of here. Right now."

"Oh, I'm a shrewd character, all right," Mike spat out sarcastically. "Two hundred dollars, and I can sell the parts for maybe four hundred. After towing the carcass down fourteen miles of dirt road, advertising in all the car magazines, and finally becoming wealthy as the responses roll in. Boy, am I shrewd! Well, you can keep your hunk of junk!"

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As she stared back at him, still defiant, Mike could see a new element in her mood. Uncertainty.

"I'm sorry, Annie," he said. "I didn't mean to be nasty. I guess it hurt me, hearing that from you."

"What's so special about me?"

"Hard to say. But I'd like to find out, if you'll give me a chance. I'm on vacation this week. Maybe you'll let me take you out to dinner, if I stay around."

"No need for that."

"I promise you, not a single word about you-know-what. Okay?"

Monday morning he phoned his boss to say he'd be out sick for a while. And he saw Annie every night that week. She was easy to flatter and hungry for affection.

Late Friday night, after they spent an hour necking in his car. Mike begged Annie to come to his motel. She refused and hoped he understood. It was just something she wasn't ready to do. But she did like him a lot. She really did.

Her declaration was more than enough. Now he knew that his plan for Sunday would succeed, and make him the owner of the rarest car in the world.

Her persuaded Annie to spend the whole weekend with him, instead of taking Uncle Oscar up to the mine. On Sunday afternoon the two of them had a picnic in a field near town. When the chicken was eaten and the wine bottle was empty, Mike lay back with his head on Annie's lap while she stroked his hair.

"This has been the greatest week of my life," he said.

"Mine, too."

"I hope you don't mind. But I got you a present."

He handed her a sterling-silver necklace.

"Mike, it's beautiful," she said. "But I can't take something like this from you. It's much too expensive."

"Annie, I've been crazy about restoring cars for about four years. Nothing else mattered to me. Before that it was motorcycles. Rebuilding them, running with a pack, doing crazy stunts, even getting myself in trouble with the law. Before motorcycles it was lifting weights until my muscles were stiff.

"You see, Annie, I've always had to have some obsession to lose myself in. Only now I've been stopped in my tracks. You've made me realize that another person can be ten times more important than all the rest of that stuff. This necklace cost me the two hundred dollars you turned down for the car." He added, with em-

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barrassment, "It's the first time I ever wanted to give something to another person."

He gently slipped the silver chain around her neck.

"You were right in not trusting me," he said. "I lied about why I wanted that wreck. Truth is, it's got parts for my Cord that I gave up hope of ever finding."

"Why did you lie?"

"Figured you'd raise the price if you knew how much I needed the parts. Pretty small view of people, I guess."

Nobody said anything for a while. Mike watched the sun beginning to go down behind the mountains. And he knew Annie was looking at him.

"Would you do me a favor?" she said quietly. "Drive us to the mine?"

Mike could barely control his excitement as he raced along the highway. In his mind he composed a letter to the Sassetta Society. *Gentlemen, I have been fortunate enough to acquire the last of the Sassettas. Since it requires extensive rebuilding, any guidance that my fellow owners . . . Naturally I would be honored if your Society would consider my application for membership.*

When they arrived, Annie led him through the dark to the cabin. Inside she lit none of the lamps, but sat down on the moonlit bed and looked up at Mike.

"I don't know if you're still interested," she said softly. "But . . . well, it's my first time wanting to give a person something, too."

Afterward, looking through the window at the mine site, Mike pointed to the Sassetta.

"The crazy things that bring people together," he said.

"What about the old man with the '25 Chevy? Was that the truth?"

"Sure. But he'll find a steering wheel somewhere."

"Take it. And all the other parts you need for yourself. I'll manage Uncle Oscar."

"Not practical. It'd need a chestful of special tools. Frankly, it'd be simpler for me to haul away the whole mess."

"I wish I could let you, Mike. But it would upset him too much. Last month some hunter took a few pot shots at the side of the crusher and Uncle Oscar had his own rifle out ready to kill the man."

"Suppose one weekend the car just wasn't here."

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"I can't do it to him. Please understand."

"He's crazy! Why do you spend your life worrying about him?"

"You said you didn't care about the parts any more."

"I was thinking about you!" he snapped back, trying to salvage his position. And then he said the only words that would get him the car. "I want you to marry me. Right away."

Annie finally agreed that a rest home was the best place for Uncle Oscar, though she hated the thought of it. He had refused to come to Los Angeles with them, so there was no alternative.

The ecstatic days of the honeymoon flowed into weeks of quieter intimacy, as Mike came to know every inch of the Sassetta in his garage, and discovered the wonderful little surprises old Benito had designed into it.

The Cord had been sold, of course. The money came in handy. Mike had impetuously sworn to restore the garish junkheap from Mother Lode Mountain no matter what the cost. Because, he told Annie, it had brought him the most important thing in his life.

He passed most evenings and weekends in his garage. Sometimes in the early morning hours he'd just flop down on the cot and sleep there. He spent hundreds of hours overseeing the labors of mechanics doing work beyond his skills. With the aid of the Sassetta Society his letters pursued parts and materials in Asia, Europe, the United States, and South America.

Of course Annie was upset by his preoccupation, and there were some arguments. She always came back worse from her visits to Uncle Oscar, who was deteriorating in both mind and body. Mike steered her into redecorating the house. He would occasionally begrudge an hour and some money to quiet her with dinner at a restaurant, and he promised her all his attention once his labor of love was finished.

As the months passed he felt like some mad juggler. Slaving away at the car, racing back to calm Annie in her latest complaint about loneliness or money, then returning to the garage as soon as he dared.

But the car was slowly being resurrected. In Milan, colors were being mixed using the same pigments Benito had insisted on. The engine ran smoothly, rebuilt from scratch. The seats had been elegantly upholstered by a genius whom Mike had discovered in Santa Monica. The sheet metal was flawless. Everything chrome had been replated. Wood for the interior appointments arrived

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from India, and after days of experimentation Mike hit upon the exact mixture of stain to duplicate the original finish.

One afternoon when he came home from the office Annie announced there had been a phone call for him that morning. The tone of her voice signaled a bad argument.

"His name was Sir George Walliston. President of the Sassetta Society. He's in Los Angeles and he wanted to know if it would be convenient for him to see the car."

She was controlling hysteria. As on the day that Uncle Oscar had died.

"I was going to surprise you about that, Annie. It was only last month I found out—"

"You wrote to him the week we got married. We talked a long time. He was here."

"Okay, so the car is worth more than I let on. By the time we got involved I was too ashamed to tell you the truth."

"You are a damned liar, Mike. You married me for that car!"

"Where can I reach Sir George?"

"You don't need me. You didn't want me! But you didn't know any other way to get that machine!"

"I asked you where Sir George Walliston is."

"Uncle Oscar died because you had to get your hands on that blasted thing!"

She screamed her hatred. Mike shook Annie by the shoulders, demanding an answer. Then he slapped her and she spat out the name of the hotel.

Sir George told him over the phone that he would love to have Mike show him the car in detail, but he was leaving soon. Would Mike have a drink with him at the airport?

Sir George was a lean well-tailored old man reeking of wealth. Mike could barely understand his accent. "Actually? You supervised the entire restoration yourself? Superbly done. . .If you're ever in London I hope you'll give me your opinion on a few sticky problems I've encountered with my own Sassetta."

The Englishman offered Mike $35,000 for the car. No? Well, at least he hoped Mike would give him a chance to bid on it if he ever decided to sell the Sassetta.

Never before had Mike felt so exhilarated. On returning home he headed straight for the garage. Not to work, but simply to be with his automobile and savor his joy more fully.

He entered and switched on the light.

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Every piece of sheet metal on the car was dented and bent out of shape. The metal was split at the welded seams. The paint was scraped and gouged. Two doors leaned back crazily, wrenched past their limits. The leather seats were slashed. And everywhere—on the hood, on the carpeting—were scattered flakes of paint and splinters of glass.

Oil was on the garage floor, and worse than that, there was a stink of burnt oil, the odor that every mechanic recognizes instantly. It comes when a dry engine has been kept running, its insides heating and expanding, until the whole thing literally welds itself into a single hunk of iron.

The car was collapsed on one corner, where the wooden spokes of a wheel had been shattered by the sledge-hammer that still lay there. Mike dropped to his knees and began caressing the wheel, and dumbly tried fitting the shattered spokes into their places between the rim and the hub. This perfect wheel that 50 years ago a superb craftsman had spent weeks constructing.

He rose and went out to look for her. The front door was locked from inside. He got around back somehow—running and screaming—in time to see her hurry out with a suitcase. She dropped it, and he threw himself at her. And finally he was using the sledge-hammer . . .

The garage today bears no marks of Mike's obsession with antique automobiles, nor of the destruction that was wrought there. Its walls are whitewashed clean. Each day when he returns from the office Mike enters, wrapped against the air-conditioned chill, and attends to Annie with a love he never knew was in him.

Now all her scars are gone. Her arms and legs seem ready to move, as if bone had had never been shattered or muscle crushed. Annie's skin looks as healthy and smooth as he remembers it, although he is not yet completely satisfied.

Mike ponders her nose, which he has been working on these past weeks. The slight bump on her bridge disturbs him. It was there before, of course, but perhaps it ought to be removed. He ponders the question for a while. No, Annie was born with that slight bump in her nose. It was original equipment.

Well then, she's almost finished. He steps back to admire her. Yes, not a bad job. For a beginner.

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Edward D. Hoch

The Theft of the Satin Jury

In this adventure Nick Velvet, the master crook, steals 15 people—the 12 jurors, the one alternate juror, and the two court attendants in a bizarre trial—a trial for murder in which a duel is fought in a reproduction of the famous yew-hedged maze at Hampton Court Palace. And once again Nick Velvet must prove himself a crackerjack criminologist as well as a crackerjack criminal—he has to double as a detective in order to succeed as a thief . . .

Criminal-Detective: NICK VELVET

Nick Velvet had paid little attention to the Satin case during its run of newspaper publicity the previous winter. He'd been involved in other things, and a murder case—even one with as many bizarre angles as the Satin shooting—could divert him for only a limited time. It was a winter of discontent for Nick, with a journey halfway around the world to Australia that had gone sour when his client inconveniently died of a heart attack before arranging to pay the balance of Nick's fee.

The spring had been better, though, and by the time the Satin case came to trial in early June, Nick's good spirits had returned. He even took time to listen one evening while Gloria ran over the events of the case as they had been reported in the press. "Can you imagine, Nicky? This woman Helen Satin claims she killed her husband's lover in a *duel!* It's like something out of the Middle Ages!"

"I don't think women fought duels in the Middle Ages," Nick observed. "Just men. And duels reached the peak of their popularity in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries—after the Middle Ages."

"You know everything, don't you, Nicky?"

He only smiled. "Sometime I'll tell you about the basic code

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duello for the pistol duel, adopted at Tipperary, in Ireland, about 1775. After the passing of the classic sword duel, pistol duels became quite popular in England, Ireland, and France—and even in America. Of course German students in this century revived the classic saber duel."

"But Nicky—in the 1970's here in America?"

"I'll admit the present circumstances are unusual, which I guess is why the police questioned her story in the first place. Gregory Satin hardly seems the sort of man that women fight duels over. Anyway, it'll be an interesting trial."

Two weeks later, Nick Velvet was to find out exactly how interesting. On the day the prosecution opened its case, Nick found himself having lunch with a conservatively dressed businessman named Adam Whipple.

"Of course you're familiar with the Satin case," Whipple said over cocktails, coming right to the point.

"I've read something about it. I suppose every newspaper in the country has been following it."

"Then you know the trial has begun."

"Yes."

Whipple sipped his drink. "I understand, Mr. Velvet, that you steal things," he said softly.

Nick glanced around, but there was no one within earshot. "I've been known to. But never money or jewelry, or anything of purely monetary value."

"Some say you once stole an entire baseball team."

Nick's eyes twinkled for an instant. "Do they really say that?"

"Mr. Velvet, could you steal the jury in the Satin case?"

Nick sat back in his chair, thinking. "The entire jury?"

"The entire jury. Twelve jurors and one alternate."

"I could do it," Nick decided, "as long as you did not intend to hold them for ransom or otherwise profit financially."

Whipple seemed surprised at such quick and easy agreement. "You understand the jury is sequestered. They're constantly guarded by two court attendants—male and female—and they're locked in hotel rooms at night. That's so they're not influenced by all the newspaper publicity about the case."

"It'll be a problem, but I think I can manage it," Nick said. "What do you want done with them?"

"Just held for a day or two and then released. I'll notify you where you can bring them."

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"Are you hoping for a mistrial? They'll only try her again, you know."

Adam Whipple, whose expression at its best could hardly be called friendly, frowned and tilted his balding head slightly. "I understand you charge a great deal of money, Mr. Velvet. For that sum I do not expect questions or opinions or suggestions."

"All right."

"You'll do it then?"

"I'll do it," Nick said.

The courtroom was crowded to capacity, and Nick had found it necessary to bribe his way into the spectators' line in order to gain admittance. It was the second day of the prosecution's case, and he sat behind two snickering housewives listening to the testimony of the detective who had investigated the case. He was a tall sharp-featured man named Reager, and he talked exactly the way a detective should talk under the circumstances.

"May I refer to my notes to refresh my memory?" he asked the prosecuting attorney, and when permission was granted he flipped open a little black notebook, glanced quickly at it, and then began to talk. "It was on the sixteenth of January, shortly after midnight, that I was summoned to the country estate of Gregory Satin."

"And who summoned you, Detective Reager?"

"The Sheriff's deputy on patrol out there. He was the first one on the scene. When I arrived I observed the deputy standing with Mrs. Satin near the entrance to this maze—"

"Suppose you describe the maze for the jury."

Nick let his eyes wander to the jury box, where the twelve men and women sat in rapt attention. It was too early in the day, and too interesting a case, for them to be fidgeting yet. He noted there were eight men and four women, plus another woman alternate seated next to them because the jury box held only twelve persons.

His mind shifted back to the witness stand in time to hear the detective saying, "—the maze was constructed of tall yew hedges, seven feet high. I understand Mr. Satin laid it out to duplicate one in the gardens of England's Hampton Court Palace. Mrs. Satin told me she'd entered the maze shortly after eleven p.m., armed with a revolver."

"That would have been about one hour before you arrived?"

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"Yes, sir." He cleared his throat. "I cautioned Mrs. Satin as to her rights—"

"Why did you think that was necessary?"

"The Sheriff's deputy who'd been first on the scene found a revolver in the snow near her, and she admitted to firing it. I questioned her further, and she told me she'd entered the maze about five minutes ahead of the dead woman, Laura Indris. The snow had stopped by that time, and there was a full moon, which enabled them to make their way between the rows of hedges. After about a half hour they found each other in the center of the maze, and both fired. Mrs. Satin shot Miss Indris dead, hitting her in the back with a single shot, apparently just as Miss Indris turned to run."

"Did Mrs. Satin refer to the shooting as a duel?"

"Yes, she did. She said they'd fought a duel."

"And where was Mr. Satin at this time?"

"He was away from the house on business. He returned home shortly before one a.m., during my questioning of Mrs. Satin."

Nick rose from his last-row seat and slipped quietly out the door. He could already see that it would be a fairly long trial. Though a duel in a maze by moonlight, fought over the love of a man, certainly had its bizarre aspects, what concerned him at the moment was the jury.

He chose a position on the sun-drenched plaza overlooking the courthouse entrance, where he could observe them on their way to lunch. He'd already decided that stealing them from the courtroom itself was impossible. Stealing them from their hotel at night would be equally impossible, with the jurors scattered in several rooms. He had to kidnap them together, and get away fast.

"Well!" a voice spoke suddenly behind him. "It's Nick Velvet himself!"

Nick recognized the voice even before he turned his head. It was that of Lieutenant Charlie Weston of the Eastbridge police, the only police detective in the entire northeast who knew him by sight, and knew what he did for a living. "Hello, Charlie. I thought you were in Eastbridge."

"I'm here on police business, delivering a bank robber to them. While I was in town I thought I'd just look in on the Satin trial. Funny thing, I saw you leaving just as I got to the door."

Nick shrugged. "Same as you. I just looked in on it."

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The detective frowned at him, squinting his eyes against the sun. "I haven't come across you since the Brazen Letters affair, Nick. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"This and that."

"Still stealing?"

"Now, Charlie!"

"What's your interest in the Satin case, Nick?"

"Just curiosity, nothing more."

"Somebody hire you to steal something?"

"What is there to steal in a courtroom during a murder trial?"

Charlie Weston thought about that. "Nothing I can think of, but you usually manage to find something."

Nick managed to grin at him. "This time I'm on vacation."

"Make sure it stays that way. I'm going to notify the local police that you're nosing around, just in case." He turned and walked away, leaving Nick standing in the sunlight.

It was not so much the presence of Charlie Weston in this vicinity as it was the sheer impossibility of the assignment that came to bother Nick as the day wore on. The jury was transported to each of its meals in a closed white van that looked like a cross between a police wagon and an armored car. And although the two court attendants were unarmed, they watched the twelve jurors and the alternate like a pair of hawks. At dinner one sat at each end of the table, making certain that no one approached the jurors or spoke to them. Even the orders to the waiter were given only under the closest supervision.

But there was a single ray of hope. The white van that transported them back and forth the three blocks between courthouse and restaurant was apparently owned by the restaurant—or more exactly, by the motel of which the restaurant was a part. Each time it dropped them off, the driver returned it to the motel parking lot. When Nick observed this he smiled slightly and began to hum a little tune. He knew how the Satin jury could be stolen—all of them—and it was amazingly simple.

It took Nick another two days to work out the details, and in that time the prosecution rested its case against Helen Satin. On the morning the defense called its first witness, Nick was in the courtroom, taking a final look at the jury. He had to be able to recognize them, that was sure!

The lead-off defense witness was Gregory Satin himself, a tow-

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ering man who spoke in a voice that boomed out against the walls of the crowded courtroom. Satin was one of the current crop of self-made millionaires—a skillful businessman and electronics engineer who had parlayed a small computer business into a multimillion-dollar chain of time-sharing offices in every major city of the country. The newspapers liked to call Gregory Satin "The Computer King," and he was not modest enough to offer any objections to that designation.

"Tell me, Mr. Satin," the defense counsel opened, "just why did you construct this maze in your garden?"

The tall man let go with his booming voice. "I visited the maze at Hampton Court Palace some years back, and it fascinated me. When we needed something to fill in a large section of our garden, Helen and I both remembered the maze. It was planted with yew hedges about eight years ago."

"Your wife knew her way through the maze?"

"Of course. We both did."

The defense attorney paused for a moment and then continued, "Now tell us, Mr. Satin, in your own words—just what was your relationship with the deceased woman?"

"I had been—uh—living with Laura Indris with some regularity for almost a year."

"You say with some regularity?"

"About two or three times a month. She wanted me to divorce Helen and marry her."

"And you refused?

"I did. In fact, I was in the process of breaking off the affair when Helen discovered it."

"After she discovered it, did she make any threats against Laura Indris?"

"No. On the contrary, the only threat was made by Laura. She told me if Helen wouldn't divorce me she'd kill her."

There was an audible hum from the spectators, although the jury remained impassive. The judge banged his gavel and then the defense questioning continued. "She actually threatened your wife's life?"

"That's correct."

"Now, Mr. Satin, will you tell us in your own words exactly what happened on the night of January 15th and the early morning of the 16th?"

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"Laura had been threatening to come out to the house, to confront Helen and settle the question of a divorce once and for all. But I didn't really think she would, and I certainly wasn't expecting her that night. For one thing, it was snowing and the driving was bad. Around ten o'clock I received a call from my office in town. There was a problem with our new British branch that had to be settled at once. I drove into town for a conference and ended up phoning London, getting my branch manager out of bed at five in the morning, their time. It was still snowing when I started home, just after midnight, and I had to drive slowly. When I reached home there were two police cars in the driveway. A detective named Reager told me what had happened."

When the judge adjourned the court for lunch, Nick decided he'd studied the jurors' faces long enough. He didn't really need to return in the afternoon, but the case was beginning to fascinate him. He wanted to hear Helen Satin tell about that duel. And so, when court resumed after lunch, he was back in his last-row seat. The woman who'd been only a head at the defense table now rose and took the stand, revealing a youthful, dark-haired beauty that the newspaper photos had only hinted at. In fact, Helen Satin was so classically lovely in her black dress and pale makeup that Nick wondered how any man could desert her for another woman.

She began to speak in a voice so low the judge had to instruct her to talk louder. "I thought we were very happy. The way I learned about Laura Indris was such a foolish thing, I almost had to laugh. They'd stayed at a New York hotel together one night, registering as Mr. and Mrs. Satin. She had a distinctive travel alarm clock in a red leather case, and she left it in the room. Of course the hotel returned it to me, and I recognized it at once.

"I showed the clock to Gregory and he admitted everything. We even discussed the possibility of a divorce, but I told him quite frankly I wouldn't let him go without a fight. He agreed finally to break off the affair with her."

"Did Laura Indris get in touch with you at all during this period?"

The dark-haired woman hesitated for a second and then replied, "Yes, she did. When Gregory told her what had happened, she telephoned and demanded that I free him. She threatened me."

"Just how did she do that?"

"She said she'd kill me to get him."

"Did you report this threat to the police?"

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"No. I didn't take it seriously at the time."

"And what happened on the night of January 15th?"

"My husband was called away on business shortly before ten o'clock, and I was left alone. A car pulled into the driveway. I couldn't imagine who'd be out on such a bad night, but I went to the door and saw that it was Laura. I think she'd been drinking, but she wasn't really drunk. She forced her way into the house and told me we were going to settle the thing once and for all.

"I suppose we screamed at each other for the better part of a half hour before she picked up a lamp and flung it at me. I was terrified and I ran to Gregory's desk. He had a matched pair of pistols on the desk which he'd cleaned and loaded for some target practise earlier in the evening. That's when Laura suggested the duel, when she saw the twin pistols. I told her she was insane, but she wouldn't listen."

"She forced you to take part in this duel?"

"Yes. She picked up one of the pistols and I had no choice but to take the other and defend myself. She said she'd give me five minutes' start and then come after me. The one who lived would have Gregory all to herself."

There was dead silence in the courtroom as she spoke, and Nick saw the jurors leaning forward, tense with every word.

"Who chose the maze?" the lawyer asked.

"I did. I knew how to reach the center quickly, and I thought I'd be safe there till Gregory returned. Usually it takes someone hours to find their way through the thing. I ran into the maze carrying the pistol. It was easy to find my way because the night had cleared by then and there was a full moon. I was wearing a fur parka to keep warm."

"What time did you enter the maze?"

"Just after eleven, I think. Perhaps about a quarter past. I went directly to the center and waited, feeling sure I'd be safe. After about five minutes I could hear her, outside the maze, calling my name. I think she must have started inside then. For the next half hour I heard her every few minutes, cursing and calling out my name, but she seemed to get no closer. I could hear occasional cars on the road, but I couldn't see them, of course. I only prayed that one of them would be Gregory, but he didn't come in time."

"Finally she found you?"

"She found me. It took her at least a half hour, but she found me. She came into the center of the maze and faced me across a

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little stone table we have there. She started to raise her arm and I heard a shot. Her bullet missed me, but I had no choice. I had to fire back, to save my own life! She must have been turning when the bullet hit her." She buried her face in her hands, sobbing softly. There was a murmur from the spectators and the judge banged his gavel.

Nick rose from his seat and slipped out the door. He would have liked to remain for the cross-examination, but the afternoon was dragging on and he had a few final arrangements to make.

Exactly at five-thirty the telephone rang in the motel garage. The uniformed attendant answered the phone and said, "I'm on my way." He locked the door behind him and walked across the enclosed portion of the garage to the parking lot that bordered one side of the motel. He was whistling as he approached the closed white van at one end of the lot and opened the door.

As he slid into the driver's seat Nick hit him from behind and pulled his limp body into the back of the van. Within three minutes Nick had changed clothes with the unconscious man, stretching the pants and shirt and coat as much as he could. The man was thinner than Nick by some thirty pounds, but perhaps they wouldn't notice the tight fit if he stayed behind the wheel.

The driver was propped in the rear of the van and covered with a sack. Then Nick got out and walked around to the back, opened the double doors, and pulled the sack-covered body out. He stuffed him into the back seat of a convenient unlocked car, hoping nobody was watching from the motel windows. Even so, they wouldn't have time to do anything. In five minutes it would be all over.

Nick drove the van out of the parking lot and headed for the courthouse. It was going to be easy. So easy.

They were waiting at the curb for him—13 jurors and the two uniformed court attendants. Nick pulled up and opened the door. The male attendant stuck his head in and asked, "Where's Tommy?"

"Went home sick."

The jurors climbed in awkwardly, with two of the more elderly needing assistance. When they were seated in the van, in two rows facing each other, Nick reached down and turned on the valve in the little tank by his feet. Then he quickly started the motor to cover the hiss of gas. The white van moved forward.

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"You're going the wrong way!" the woman attendant said.

"They got the street torn up. I have to go around the block."

"Street torn up at this time of night?"

"Broken water main. It's all flooded." Nick covered his mouth and nose with a handkerchief, breathing as best he could from a tiny oxygen inhaler hidden inside it. He hoped the stuff worked quickly.

"What's that noise?" one of the male jurors asked. "Sounds like gas escaping. Maybe your muffler's shot."

"It's okay," Nick mumbled through the handkerchief.

There was a thud from the back as one of the jurors toppled to the floor. "Something's wrong here!" another man shouted. "Something's—"

Nick speeded up and took the next corner with a recklessness that threatened to overturn them. Suddenly the guard was at his throat, trying to yank him from the wheel. "You're not—" The grip relaxed almost at once. After another block Nick turned his head for a quick check. The 15 people in the back of the van were toppled in various positions, all unconscious. He knew the gas would keep them that way for about two hours, which should be long enough.

A few miles farther on, near the city line, Nick pulled into the parking lot of a shopping center. Adam Whipple was waiting for him standing beside his car with an expression of smiling satisfaction. "You did it?" he asked as Nick climbed out of the van.

"One Satin jury, complete with alternate and two court attendants. They're taking a bit of a nap, and should stay like that for about two hours. Where do you want me to take them?"

"Out to Gregory Satin's estate."

Nick whistled softly. "Why there?"

Whipple lit a thin cigar, sheltering the match from the evening breeze. "You said I wanted a mistrial, and you were right. We've probably got one already, but I have to be certain. The judge might decide that the mere kidnaping of the jury for a few hours or even a day didn't contaminate them as far as the case was concerned. But if they're found at Satin's estate, in the company of the defendant's husband, there can be no doubt of a mistrial."

"All right," Nick said. "You're paying the bills." He was prepared for a journey, since he'd known Whipple would want the stolen jury taken somewhere. Quickly he changed the license plate on the van, and then he unrolled two adhesive-backed signs

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for the side panels of the van. In an instant it had become a delivery truck for The Star Florist Shop.

"Clever," Whipple commented, puffing on his cigar.

"I wish I had time to paint it some other color." Although they were in an empty portion of the parking lot, Nick cast an anxious eye toward a supermarket a hundred yards away where a brisk evening trade was developing. "We'd better get going. I'll follow you."

Whipple nodded and climbed into his car. "If we see any police, just leave the truck and run," he advised Nick.

"Don't worry, I'll deliver them. You haven't paid me the rest of my money yet."

The estate of Gregory Satin was only a few miles out of the city, in a low rambling countryside that came into view all at once as Nick reached the top of a hill. He had to admit it was a beautiful place, with horses grazing along a rail fence and a tree-lined driveway curving up to the big English-style manor house. If any home demanded a yew-hedge maze in its gardens, this one did.

Adam Whipple's car pulled up to the front door, and Nick brought the white van to a stop right behind it. As he got out, the front door opened and the tall familiar figure of Gregory Satin appeared.

"Well, Whipple, I never thought you'd have the nerve to show your face around here again! Who's this fellow in the truck?"

"We've brought you something," Whipple said with the tone of a magician about to perform his newest trick. "Come here and look."

Whatever Satin's reaction was to be at finding his wife's jury in that truck, Nick felt he'd rather not witness it. He moved away from the white van, over to the side of the house, anxious to see this strange maze that had been the scene of an equally strange duel.

And there it was—the top of its hedges a foot above Nick's head. The yew bushes had grown together so thickly that walking through them, or even seeing through them, was impossible. And of course he could not see over them. He suspected that other plants, possibly holly, had been intermixed to increase the density.

Nick heard Gregory Satin say, in a loud voice, "Whipple, you

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must be mad to do a thing like this!" Nick entered the maze.

It was a strange twilight world here, where all he could see was the dim June sky above him. In every other direction there was only the green of the yew hedges, thick and alive with frustration. In some places the passage was so narrow that the tendrils stung his face.

What had he read somewhere, of a maze in Crete which was supposed to have a minotaur at its center? He wondered what he would find at the center of Gregory Satin's maze, wondered what treasure or terror might await him.

As he rounded the final inner corner of the labyrinth and saw the stone table that marked its center, a figure all in black turned at the sound of his approach. Nick's heart tensed with surprise.

"What are you doing here?" the woman's voice asked. It was the accused murderess, Helen Satin.

"I could ask you the same question," Nick Velvet said, "I saw you in the courtroom only a few hours ago."

She was even more lovely close up, in this strange twilight, than she had been in court. "Do you think they've kept me locked in a cell since January? I've been out on bail, of course. Now who are you, and how did you find the center of the labyrinth?"

"My name is Nick Velvet. I'm a business associate of Adam Whipple."

She snorted at that. "Whipple is a fool. He came to us after the shooting and told Gregory he could get me off. He said that for fifty thousand dollars he'd guarantee my exoneration."

Nick mentally subtracted his own $20,000 fee from that amount and decided that Whipple would turn a good profit if the thing came off. "Did your husband pay him the money?"

"If you're Whipple's business associate you should know that he didn't. In fact, my husband threw him out of the house." She stepped around the stone table for a closer view of him in the failing light. "Now suppose you answer my other question. How did you find the center of the maze so quickly?"

"How do you know I did it quickly?" Nick countered.

"Because I just came in here myself, when I saw the car and the van driving up. I thought it might be a television news crew, and I wanted to get away from them."

"Do you often use the maze to get away from people?"

"You're thinking of that night, aren't you, Mr. Velvet? When I ran away from Laura Indris—"

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"I'll admit it was on my mind."

A voice reached them from far away. "Velvet!" it called. "Nick Velvet, where are you?"

"You're being paged," she said.

"So I hear. Hope I can find my way out of this place as easily as I got in."

"Come on." She smiled and reached out to take his hand. "I'll show you the way."

"I thought you were hiding."

"What good did it do? You found me."

He followed her out the way he'd come in, past the walls of yew hedge, down the twisting, turning tunnel to the outer world. When they reached it, Nick saw that another car had pulled up behind the white van. He sensed in that instant something had gone wrong, and he turned to seek a way out.

"Hold it, Velvet! Hold it right there!"

He relaxed and kept turning until he faced the gun in the steady hand of Lieutenant Charlie Weston. "Well, fancy meeting you here!"

"Up with your hands, Velvet," the detective said. "Your thieving days are over for good this time."

"How did you find me so quickly?" Nick asked, when they had all moved into the big house. He was aware that his words were almost an echo of the question Helen Satin had asked him at the center of the labyrinth.

Charlie Weston still held the gun, and his eyes were cold and hard. "Do you think I believed you when you told me you just looked in on the Satin trial? I know you, Nick. I know your methods. I almost put you behind bars in the Brazen Letters case, and this time I'm not going to let you slip away. I've been working with the local police and we've had a tail on you these last couple of days. We had an elaborate system for following the white van, using a police helicopter. You didn't have a chance, Nick."

More police had arrived, and they were beginning to revive the people in the van. Two of the women jurors were helped inside to chairs. One of the court attendants, shaking his head to clear it, walked up to Nick. "This is the one—this is the man who was driving the van that picked us up. When I realized something was wrong I tried to grab him but the gas knocked me out too quick."

Weston nodded. "Thank you. We'll be using your testimony."

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Gregory Satin and his wife were standing to one side, white-faced and nervous. Satin had already denounced Adam Whipple as the man behind the plot, but it seemed unlikely that Satin could completely escape blame. Whipple himself was already handcuffed, and now Weston said, "Hold out your hands, Nick."

The handcuffs clicked into place, and for the first time in his life Nick felt helpless. Kidnaping an entire jury was likely to rate a stiff prison sentence, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

"Tell me one thing," Helen Satin said. "How did you find the center of the maze so quickly?"

"The maze is a duplicate of the one at Hampton Court Palace, which is one of the most famous mazes in the world. I did a little reading about it the last few days. A number of books, including the Encyclopaedia Britannica, give the solution to the labyrinth—go left on entering, then right at the next two forks, then left the rest of the way."

She nodded, watching him with her wide eyes as she had in the center of the maze. Perhaps, he decided, she was something of a minotaur after all—if a minotaur could ever be feminine. Certainly she'd been one for Laura Indris, who had found her at the center of that maze.

"Could I speak to you?" Nick suddenly asked Lieutenant Weston. "Alone?"

The detective frowned and motioned him to one side of the huge living room. More jurors were being brought in now, and the place was becoming crowded. "No tricks now," Weston cautioned. "You're not squirming out of this one."

"I just thought you might be willing to make a deal," Nick said. "You've got your jury back, and nobody's been hurt, not really."

"But the judge will call a mistrial, which is just what you planned. Chances are Helen Satin won't be tried again till fall, because the courts pretty much close down during July and August. And that's just what Whipple wanted when he hired you."

Nick shrugged. "I just thought you'd be more interested in seeing justice done than in sending me to prison."

"Justice will be done."

"You could score big with the local police if you handed them the true story of what happened in that maze."

Weston frowned at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That the killing of Laura Indris couldn't have happened the way Helen Satin says it did."

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"You mean because she was shot in the back?"

"No, I mean because Helen Indris found the center of the maze after searching a half hour."

"You think that was too soon?"

"It was too long."

Weston frowned and cleared his throat. "Damn it, Velvet, what do you want?"

"Just for you to take these cuffs off and let me walk away. It's as simple as that. Promise to do it, and I'll tell you what really happened in that maze on the night of January fifteenth."

Weston cursed and reached out to unlock the handcuffs. "You'd better make it good."

The entire jury had now recovered enough to come into the living room and they stood and sat along two walls. "We'll leave it up to them," Nick said.

He rubbed his freed wrists a bit to restore the circulation, then stepped to the center of the room, standing opposite Satin and his wife and Adam Whipple, with Weston and the other police behind him. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," he began. "First, I want to apologize for the manner in which you were brought here. I usually do things a bit more skillfully."

"Get to the point," Weston said behind him.

"I will. Now, folks, I'm sure the judge is going to call a mistrial in this case, but it doesn't seem fair to me that you shouldn't have a chance to decide on an alternate version of the facts—a version I'm going to present to you now. If I convince you of what really happened in that maze last January, Lieutenant Weston here has agreed to let me go."

There were some murmurs of objection from the local police, but Nick hurried on. "Since you've already heard most of the testimony, and since we have the two star witnesses here with us, let's get right to it. Mrs. Satin, if we are to believe your story, it took Laura Indris a full half hour to find the center of the maze that night."

"Some people have taken much longer than that—hours, in fact. She'd never been there before, never seen the maze before—and she'd obviously not read about it in the encyclopaedia, as you did."

Nick smiled at Helen Satin. "It's possible she consulted a reference book."

She shook her head. "You forget that it was I who chose the

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maze as the site of the duel. She couldn't have prepared herself in advance, because she didn't know I'd run in there."

"All right," Nick granted. "She arrived at the entrance to a maze she'd never seen before, with you hiding somewhere inside it with a gun. I repeat my question. Why did it take her a half hour to find you? Because, as two witnesses have testified, it had snowed earlier that evening. Your route through the labyrinth, Mrs. Satin, would have been as sharp and clear as your footprints in the snow under a full moon."

One of the jurors gasped, and every eye in the room turned to Helen Satin. "I—the footprints! I never thought of them. I was so frightened I never even looked down."

"But they were there. Are we to believe your story, that with the footprints to guide her, it still took Laura Indris at least thirty minutes to find you?"

"Why should I lie? Why would I make up such a fantastic story, about the duel and all, if it weren't true?" She was trying to control herself, but the composure she'd shown during the trial was now cracking.

Nick Velvet turned to face the jury, feeling like a prosecuting attorney about to score a telling point. "I don't think you did lie, Mrs. Satin. If you thought up a lie like that, you would certainly have thought up a slight additional lie to cover the bullet wound in the back. You told what you thought was the truth. And yet—Laura Indris still waited a full half hour before following your footprints to the center of the labyrinth. Why?"

"All right, why?" Charlie Weston asked from behind Nick.

"Well, we know that Helen Satin was playing for time, hiding in the maze in the hope her husband would return. If Laura Indris was also waiting, it could only have been for the same thing. She waited a half hour for Gregory Satin to return—to help with the murder of his wife!"

Satin took a step toward Nick, his hands balled into fists, and then thought better of it. "That's crazy," he growled. "I was still at my office."

"I think not. You said you phoned your London office and had to get the manager out of bed, at five in the morning London time. Since there's six hours' difference between here and London, that means you left the office shortly after eleven, not twelve. This is confirmed by the fact that it was still snowing when you started home. We know from both your wife and Detective Reager

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that the full moon was out and the skies clear by midnight. You started home sometime after eleven, and reached home at just about the time Laura Indris started into the maze. You were with her, you had the second gun, and you fired the fatal shot."

"I shot her!" Helen Satin almost screamed. "He wasn't there!"

"The twin guns left out so conveniently, loaded so conveniently. Gregory meant it to happen just as it did. He was sure that, given a choice, you'd run into the maze. Both guns were loaded with blanks—till he arrived home and loaded Laura's weapon with real bullets."

"I saw her with the gun—I tell you I saw her!"

"You saw her raise her arm, that's all—but not *holding* a gun. You heard a shot—fired by your husband. Then you fired an instant later and Laura fell dead. It was a simple matter afterwards for Gregory to switch the two pistols so that it would appear you had fired the fatal one."

"But *why?*"

"Why?" Nick repeated. "I don't know why. Did he aim for you and hit Laura by accident, or did he mean to kill her all along? Did he mean to get rid of you both with this one scheme? Suppose we ask him."

But Gregory Satin had already broken away. He ran out the door before any of the police could stop him. "He's heading for the maze!" Adam Whipple shouted.

Nick turned and faced the jury. "Ladies and gentlemen, I rest my case."

A few of them broke into applause, and then the others joined in. Charlie Weston walked over. "I'll give you five minutes to get out of here, Nick. Then I put out an alarm for you."

"Thanks."

"You won't thank me the next time, but a deal's a deal."

"What about me?" Whipple asked.

Weston unlocked his handcuffs. "Get out! We can't arrest you without Velvet."

Whipple followed Nick. "Come on. I'll give you a ride back to town."

"You'll give me more than that," Nick reminded him. "The rest of my fee."

"That too."

"What's with you, Whipple?" he asked as they got into the car. "You wanted more than the money."

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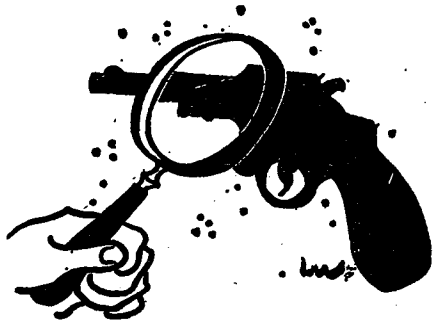
"She told me she was afraid he'd kill her. I knew he did kill her, and I wanted to delay the trial till I could find some evidence against him. You see, she was my kid sister."

"Helen Satin?"

"No. Laura Indris. Laura Whipple."

They pulled around the curving driveway, past the yew-hedge maze where the police were moving in now, tracking Gregory Satin to its very center. Nick watched out the window and then said, "Maybe they just won't find him in there. Maybe for people like Gregory Satin there's always a minotaur waiting at the center of the maze."

But the five minutes Lieutenant Weston had given Nick were almost up, so he didn't wait to find out.



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Joel Townsley Rogers

The Murderer

Joel Townsley Rogers' "The Murderer" first appeared in the November 23, 1946 issue of "The Saturday Evening Post." The editors of the SEP considered it "one of the most unusual mystery stories the 'Post' ever ran." And although more than a quarter of a century has passed since the story's first publication, "The Murderer" is still a comparatively neglected "classic" of its kind . . .

John Bantreagh backed away from her a step on caving knees, with his gaze still on her. She looked so helpless, and somehow innocent, lying here on the meadow grass in the gray, still dawn, in front of his farm-truck wheels. In her white dress with its big red polka dots and red patent-leather belt, and her white shoes with their red heels. With her red mouth and light-brown curly hair, and her hazel eyes open.

Looking at him, it seemed like, out of dream-filled sleep, a little blankly. As she did sometimes in the early mornings, while he dressed quietly to go out and do the chores, with eyes wide-open, though not yet all awake. But, of course, she wasn't. There was an opaqueness on her lenses, there was a cold dew on her face, and she was dead.

One wheel had gone over her throat and the other over her sheer-clad ankles. Her legs had hardly been hurt at all, he thought; the ground was *soft*, and they had just been pressed down into the mire and grass roots. Only her throat had been broken—the trachea, the larynx, and pharynx, or whatever else there was in people's throats that made them live and breathe. That made them talk, too. Her eyes were on him, with that look they had. But she would never say who had done it.

John Bantreagh felt as if his own throat had been crushed, as he tried to pull his gaze away, with his knees caving. As if a heavy wheel had rolled onto it and—not like with her—had not backed away. He looked around him slowly with his reddened

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gaze. He had a feeling that other eyes were watching him, if not hers. But it was a lonely meadow, on a lonely road. Just dark pine woods around, and the dirt road two or three hundred yards away, beyond the tumble-down snake fence that bordered it.

His truck motor had died. He must start it and back down across the meadow to the road again. Get on back home before anyone was stirring. Let her be found by someone else. It would be hours, way off here—it might be even days. That would be too much to endure, knowing she was here. This evening, if no one had found her before then, he might suggest, just offhandedly, looking along here, as if it were something that had occurred to him without any reason.

There was just so much a man could stand.

The air had lightened from dark silver to pearl. It was not full light yet, but it was no longer night. He had never known a moment so quiet and still. Across the meadow grass he could see the tracks of his truck coming in at a diagonal from the road, through the break in the fence, where the weeds were crushed down that grew in the shallow roadside ditch and along the field side of the fence. Two parallel lines, with only moderate waves in them, coming directly to where his truck stood now with its front tires almost touching her. Smooth-worn front tires, but cleated rear tires, which had left their tracks of broad, deep, transverse ridges. They were a pair he had ordered from the mail-order catalogue, and had cost a lot of money. He had got them from the freight office only yesterday morning, along with the things for Mollie and the kids, and the rest of the order; and had put them on when he got back home, with her and the kids watching him.

Just yesterday forenoon Mollie had been rinsing out some things on the back porch bench beside the pump, with her wrists buried in the washbasin, and soapy water splashing on the ground off the porch edge. She had paused to brush back her tendrils of damp hair with the inside of her elbow, squeezing out a handful of sand-colored fabric.

"You're proud of those tires, aren't you, John?"

"Sure am!" he told her as he knelt on the gravel unwrapping one of them. "I'll bet nobody else has anything like them in the whole county. Eight-ply, tractor tread, guaranteed for fifty thousand miles. Could have got a good-enough tire for six fifty less apiece, maybe. But it's smart to get something that lasts, as I can see it."

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"I reckon you're pretty smart, John."

"Sure am, honey. I got you."

"How long do you figure I'm guaranteed for?"

"Till death do us part," he had replied, grinning.

She had laid the sand-colored fabric down on the bench and had squeezed out a handful of something black—her dark blue blouse, it must be, that looked black because it was wet. She didn't have any black things. She didn't seem altogether pleased. The tires had cost a lot of money. Maybe she was thinking of the nice things it could have bought.

"What are you washing out, honey?" he had asked her.

"Just my rayon stockings and some old things."

"Maybe some day you'll have a pair of nylons, so you won't have to take such care of those rayons. I saw Lilybelle wearing a pair the other day. I wouldn't know, but she said they were. I guess every woman likes them."

"Does Lilybelle have nylon underwear, too?"

She liked to tease him at times about Lilybelle. It was just a joke. She wasn't really jealous of Lilybelle. She hadn't any reason to be that he knew of.

"She didn't say, honey," he told her.

She had said something else then, brushing back her hair again, but he hadn't heard, having begun to pry one of the old bare-tread shoes off a rim with a mallet and tire iron. The kids had been jumping around and yelling, and she might have been reprimanding them . . . Vaguely, in the back of his mind, he wondered who would take care of the kids now. It was the first time he had thought of it.

His knees caved and caved. He had heard of men's knees doing that, but it didn't seem natural. He couldn't control them, though. He stiffened them, and they jerked down again as if they were only water. He planted a hand on the mudguard of his truck, taking a dragging step back toward the seat. He must start his engine and back down to the road again and go on home. Now.

There was no sound of distant barnyard roosters. It must be a good mile at least, maybe two or five, to the nearest house. If there was any wildlife in the woods around the meadow—fox, bobcat, possum—it was keeping very still.

A car was coming along the road already, though. A sedan with some early driver at the wheel. It slowed its bumping progress as it approached the break in the fence. It came to a momentary

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halt. The driver had seen his truck and him in the meadow, John Bantreagh thought, standing motionless. Maybe he could see the white of her dress in front of his wheels, though the truck might hide that from the road.

The car turned and came in, anyway. It drove slowly along the broad, deep, cleated tracks of his truck, approaching. That it should take the same course was perhaps inevitable, or at least expectable. Every field, however smooth, has its own hidden soft spots, waves, and hummocks, and one car will tend to follow the same path across it as another, unless deliberately held to a different course. Particularly when a previous car has already made ruts at the grass roots.

The driver of the approaching sedan probably didn't realize that he was flattening out those cleated and distinctive treads beneath the impress of whatever nondescript tire treads he might have himself. Perhaps he didn't notice them. Or if he did, he considered their preservation of no importance.

It wasn't important, of course, thought John Bantreagh. His truck was here, he was here. He rested the palm of his left hand on the mudguard. His eyes burned red and sleepless. His throat was dry. His right hand hung down at his side with something in it. His truck crank, he realized. He didn't know how long he had had it in his hand. He had been quite unaware of it. He hadn't the strength now to place it back on the truck floor where he usually kept it. Not even to open his hand and let it drop into the grass.

The driver of the sedan stopped with his bumper nudging the back of the truck. He opened the door and got out. He was a big young fellow with a bronzed, square-jawed face and alert and steady gray eyes. He wore a black tropical suit, unbuttoned on an expanse of soft white shirt, black-necktied, and a black slouch hat. He overtopped John Bantreagh by four inches. His lithe, light-stepping frame had the massed weight of 200 pounds. He was a dozen years younger than John Bantreagh—perhaps he was 25. He looked fresh and well slept and newly bathed, competent and cool.

He pushed back his hat on his crisp black curls. He wore a nickeled badge, pinned to a red suspender strap over his white shirt. There was a polished walnut gun butt extruding from a black holster on his right hip, and a pair of handcuffs hanging beside it from his belt.

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He gave a brief, alert glance at John Bantreagh's stained, red-eyed face and thin, shaking form. He stood looking down at the woman's body lying supine in front of the truck wheels, with his fists planted on his hips and his pectoral muscles expanded.

"What happened?" he said, "Run over?"

John Bantreagh swallowed. "Yes."

"It looks pretty much like it was deliberate," the big young fellow said quietly.

He squatted beside her, looking, not touching. With steady, alert eyes. With his alert and sleep-refreshed brain behind them.

"Name's Clade," he said. "Roy Clade, deppity, from over in Boomerburg. I was due at the courthouse this morning on a car-stealing case, and just happened to take the back road, first time in a year. Never thought I'd run into anything like this."

"No," John Bantreagh swallowed. "I reckon nobody would."

"Yep, she was murdered," the young deputy said quietly. "No two ways about it. Blood on the back of her head, matted with her hair. She was hit with a tire iron or something, and then laid on the ground when she was out cold, and the front wheels run up onto her. Know who she is?"

"Yes," John Bantreagh swallowed. "Her name's—her name was Mollie Bantreagh—Mrs. John Bantreagh—from over outside of Jeffersonville. Funny name, sounds like 'pantry,' " he said tonelessly—as he always did, to forestall banal remarks about it. "I don't know where it came from. Some say it's an aristocratic name in Scotland, but I don't know. She's—she was my wife."

"Your wife!" The young deputy shot up a quick keen look at him. "You mean you were her husband?"

"Yes," John Bantreagh said. "That's right." He could not stop the wobbling of his knees. The dryness stuck in his throat. He rubbed his Adam's apple with his left hand to relieve the pressure on it.

"Tough!" said the young deputy, in a voice of proper sympathetic pitch. "Your wife! Gee! I thought you were just some stranger driving by. I'm not a married man myself. But your wife—she must have meant an awful lot to you. I'll bet this has hit you hard."

"Yes," said John Bantreagh, feeling his throat. "We had our little disagreements at times, like everybody. I reckon the neighbors know. She always liked nice things a lot."

"All married people have their little battles, I expect," said the

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young deputy awkwardly. "It'd be kind of funny if they didn't. Gee, your wife, though! Kids, I suppose, too?"

"Three," said John Bantreagh. "Three. Two boys and a girl."

"And no one to look after them now, I reckon. Tough!" the young deputy said again, with an effort at feeling. "It sure is an awful break for you, Mr. Bantreagh. Who could have done a thing like this, anyway?"

"I—" said John Bantreagh, swallowing. "I thought maybe I could get Lilybelle to look after them for a spell. She's not very fond of kids, I don't think, but she might do it for me."

"Who's Lilybelle?"

"Lilybelle Turner, lives next place down the road," said John Bantreagh. "She's only a kid herself, just nineteen, and not seeming hardly that old, with her dark curls and blue eyes. All she can think of is having a good time and loving. Mollie—Mollie used to pretend to be kind of jealous of her, just joking. But she's a woman, anyway, and I reckon I can get her to pitch in and help with the kids, if the neighbors don't talk."

"There's always another woman, isn't there?" remarked the young deputy. "I mean there's always one to pitch in and help with the kids, I reckon, unless a man lives at the North Pole, when his wife goes."

But he hadn't been paying much attention to the problem, his manner indicated. He had pulled out a silver pencil and a brownish paper-bound notebook from his inner jacket pocket. He opened the notebook on his knee and unscrewed the pencil. John Bantreagh watched with dull, bloodshot eyes what he was writing.

"'Mollie Bantreagh, Mrs. John Bantreagh, res. nr. Jeff'ville. Struck on back of head by tire iron or other instr'm'nt & run onto by car's front wheels. Body found by husband—'"

He looked up with sharp alertness at John Bantreagh, with his pencil halted. Bantreagh swayed. He leaned back against his truck with his crank hanging from his hand. It was coming now—the question.

"What time did you find her, Mr. Bantreagh?"

John Bantreagh let his breath seep out. He stiffened his knees. It was bound to come. But this wasn't it yet.

"I haven't got a watch," he said tonelessly. "It was just getting kind of silver light. Maybe ten minutes ago. Maybe half an hour or three quarters—I don't know. It kind of knocked me out."

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"I'll put it as four forty-five," said the young deputy sympathetically. "The exact time, I reckon, doesn't make any particular difference.

" 'Found by husband at four forty-five,' " he recited as he wrote. " 'Joined by Deputy Clade at five-oh-three and scene observed. No footprints. No tire tread discernible on body; smudge on nylon stockings indication possible print had been wiped off by hand. Possible tire tracks on field obliterated by husband's car and Deputy Clade's. Implement with which struck removed by killer. No other objects apparent on scene to indicate identity.' I guess that's the story, Mr. Bantreagh."

He put away his book and pencil. He pushed his hat off the back of his head and set it on levelly again, with his frowning gaze a moment on her staring eyes.

John Bantreagh swallowed. "They're nylons?" he said.

"What? Her stockings? Oh, sure. All the women've got to have them. What did you think they were?"

"I thought they were rayons," said John Bantreagh. "The pair I got for her last Christmas. I thought they were just rayons all the time. But then tonight I figured they were nylons."

"Oh, sure," the young deputy repeated mechanically. "All the women've got to have them."

He pushed his hat on the back of his head again and stood up.

"Who could have done it?" he repeated quietly, with his fists planted on his hips, looking down at John Bantreagh's pallid face and bloodshot eyes with his keen, alert gaze, with his fresh, keen brain behind it. "Who do you suppose could have done it, Mr. Bantreagh? I mean," he explained with frowning brow, "she couldn't have been murdered for her jewels and money, because I don't reckon she had any—more than just her wedding ring that she's still got on, and maybe a couple of nickels in her coin purse on her belt or something like that. It couldn't have been just a maniac, because how could he have got her out to a lonely place like this to murder her, without her putting up some sort of a fight and screaming?

"It was some man she knew, who wanted to get rid of her. Because he was crazy about some beautiful little kid who was a few years younger than she was, maybe; and she knew about it, and was always nagging him, and stood in his way. And so he got her to ride out here with him, and he cracked her on the head with this tire iron or something that he had laid on the seat beside him

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handy, probably while he was making love to her, and then hauled her out and laid her down in front of his car, and ran his wheels up on her and crushed the life out of her. Figuring to drop her body in the ditch beside the road back near where she lived, like she had been struck by a hit-and-run while walking home.

"Only, after he had done it," the young deputy said, frowning at John Bantreagh, "he could see it wouldn't pass. The way her throat had been crushed would be only like she had been lying unconscious on the ground when she had been run over, just the way it had been done. There would be meadow mud and grass stains, maybe, on her dress. And maybe ten or a hundred other things that he couldn't think of at the moment, but that wouldn't let it pass. So it was murder," he said quietly, "and nothing else. And there was nothing for him to do but just leave her here, and go on home and go to sleep, like nothing had happened, waiting till somebody else happened to find her. Figuring that it wouldn't be for some hours yet, at least. And maybe days, because it was such a lonely road. Though hoping, too, that it wouldn't be too long.

"And so, as I figure it, Mr. Bantreagh, he got up quietly from where he was kneeling beside her, when he was sure she was dead, and backed away from her to get into his car again, that he had rolled back off her, and back it down across the meadow to the road again. Figuring that if he had left any tire tracks a few hours more might dim them out. Or that maybe somebody else had tires like his, or that maybe when somebody else would come along, they would roll over them with their own tracks before they had noticed them.

"Now, there's just one thing that I've got to ask you, Mr. Bantreagh."

A faint dawn breath across the dewed meadow stirred a drape of his crisp, freshly pressed black jacket as he stood looking down at John Bantreagh. It stirred the ends of the black knit four-in-hand on his expanse of white shirt above his flat, quiet-breathing diaphragm. The skin on his hard, young, fresh-shaven face was shiny and tight, and a little muscle rippled at the corner of his mouth, though John Bantreagh's eyes did not lift that high.

His knees—John Bantreagh's—caved, and he stiffened them. He leaned back against the windshield post of his truck, thrusting his heels against the ground. His bloodshot eyes swam, out of focus. He fingered his throat with his left hand, glancing involuntarily

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down. There was a deep scratch or cut across the back of his right hand, he saw, that was gripped about the crank handle. He didn't remember when he had got it, but it was still oozing. Some of the blood must have seeped stickily around onto his clenched palm, helping to glue it to the iron.

Now! he thought. What form the question would take, he didn't know. But it must come. The throat muscles of the big young deputy were still moving beneath his broad, smooth-shaven chin. He had paused only for a moment.

"Just one question, Mr. Bantreagh," he repeated. "It may seem kind of cold and brutal of me to ask it, at a time like this," he added, a little awkwardly. "But if I didn't, someone else would, anyway. And they still will, I reckon, and keep on asking it until they've found out whatever there is to know. You understand, a law officer's got his job to do, and it's just impersonal. What I mean is, Mr. Bantreagh, was there anybody that she had been going around with that you ever heard about? A boy friend that she had, I mean—someone that she had been two-timing you with? Of course," he added, "she might have been stepping out and you not have known anything about it. That happens, too. But there must have been someone, just on the face of it, because he would have been the only man in the world who would have any cause to have done it, as sure as hell. Did she ever drop any hint to you about him, Mr. Bantreagh, as to who he was? I don't mean to seem cold and brutal at a time like this."

John Bantreagh swallowed. "I know you've got to ask your questions," he said, pulling at the loose skin of his throat. "That's all right. Yes, I reckon there was"—he swallowed—"someone. She used to go down to the village two or three times a week after supper; it's only a couple of miles away. She'd tell me she was going to the library to read magazines and books. She was always a great hand for reading. I couldn't drive her in the truck, because somebody had to stay home with the kids. I'd be asleep by the time she got home. But it seems she didn't really go to the library at all. This fellow would pick her up on the road, and they'd go riding in his car. I only learned about it last night."

He swallowed again. He rubbed his forehead with his left hand. There was some small thing he was trying to remember. But there was much more that he wanted to forget.

"I woke up," he said tonelessly, "with one of the kids crying. He was cold, and wanted a blanket on him. Mollie always looked to

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heir covers when she came home or got up in the night herself. But she hadn't got home yet. By the looks of the moonlight out on he yard it looked kind of late. I held the alarm clock to the win-low and saw it was one o'clock. I lit the lamp and put on my ants and shoes and went out to the road in front and looked lown it, but didn't see her coming. There was something white on he front porch of the Turner house a quarter mile down, but that vas all.

"So I went back in and covered the kids up better, tucking them n. They sure looked cute in their new pajamas, and I wished she vas there to see them. I'd got pajamas for them with my tire rder that had come in the morning, blue and white stripes for he boys, and the baby's pink with white ducks on them. She adn't seen them in them yet; she'd gone out right after supper, efore I'd got them to bed. That made me think"—John Ban-reagh swallowed—"of the nylons. Her birthday was tomorrow—oday. Twenty-nine. And I had ordered her a pair of nylons. I fig-ured she would like them. She had never had any.

"I had left them out in the truck in back, under the seat, to get and give her in the morning. But I thought it might be kind of nice to put them in her bottom drawer for her, where she kept her things, and kind of say something to her in the morning, joking like, that I had heard a mouse in her drawer last night, maybe it was making a nest. And she would hurry to open it and pull out all her things, and would find them at the bottom, and it would surprise her.

"So I brought them in in their envelope," said John Bantreagh tonelessly, "and opened her drawer and took out some of her things on top, the socks she generally wears and her blouses and skirts that she had made and a couple of starched house dresses. She kept her rayons in the drawer, I knew. But she was wearing them, I thought. I didn't know she had any other stockings." He swallowed. "But there were lots of stockings there, hid away at the bottom. A dozen pairs of them. They were the same color as her rayons, but they were smooth and slick. They had the feel of the nylons I had bought her now. And there were underthings—pink things, silk and nylon things, things with lace on them. There was even a set of black-lace step-ins and bras. They were what she had been wringing out, or others like them, when I'd been putting on my new tires that forenoon, in a little squeezed-up handful before my eyes. I don't know what there is about

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black-lace things. They're not what a woman gets for herself They make it seem more awful, somehow.

"I was kind of upwrought." John Bantreagh swallowed. "There was a pint out in the kitchen cupboard that her sister's husband had given me last summer when they visited, only I'm not much of a drinking man. But I got it down and took some now. I thought I'd better go and find her. I put on a shirt and coat, and put the matches up on the kitchen shelf where the kids couldn't reach them, and put out the lamp. I went out to crank the truck. I had just picked up the crank, when I looked around, and thought I saw her on the back porch behind me, in the moonlight and the vines. Only it wasn't her. It wasn't anything. It was just the moonlight moving."

John Bantreagh pulled at his throat. "I cranked the truck then," he went on, "and got in it, and went down the road towards the village. On the Turner porch steps, just off the road, there was something white sitting. It was Lilybelle, sitting in the moonlight in her nightdress with her arms about her knees. 'Hello, Mr. Bantreagh!' she called out to me, kind of low. 'Where are you going at this time of night? What's happened to Mrs. Bantreagh?'

"I stopped." John Bantreagh swallowed. "I didn't want any gossip started. 'What do you mean, what's happened to her?' I said.

" 'I woke up and came out on the steps a little while ago,' she said. 'The moonlight was so pretty. And I looked up the road and thought I saw somebody going into your house, like she had just got home.'

" 'No,' I told her. 'It must have been me. Mollie's been home since ten o'clock.' Not wanting to start any gossip.

" 'I love the moonlight,' Lilybelle said. 'It's so quiet and so mysterious. I saw a lamp lit in your house, and then put out again. I heard your back screen door slam and thought I heard you say something like, "What have you been doing, Mollie?" kind of sharp and mad. Then I could hear you cranking your car. I wondered if maybe she wasn't feeling well, and you were going for the doctor.'

" 'No,' I told her. 'I guess for a minute I thought maybe she had come out on the back porch behind me. But it wasn't her. It was just the vines moving in the moonlight. I just thought I'd take a ride to set my new tires right.'

"Then—I don't know why—but she looked so kind of pretty, with her dark curls and her big eyes, and the moonlight silver on

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her nightdress and her bare feet, and I had the nylons on the seat beside me, that I'd brought back out to the truck again, without knowing it; and I said to her, 'Would you like a pair of nylons, Lilybelle?' And she got up and came out to the truck, and stood up on the running board beside me and opened them.

" 'My!' she said. 'You sure know your way around, Mr. Bantreagh! What is it a bribe for? Have you murdered Mrs. Bantreagh, and you want me to keep it quiet?' "

John Bantreagh swallowed.

"Laughing," he said. "Just joking. She didn't have any idea that she was dead, of course. And she looked in the back of my truck, where I've got those old burlaps, and she said to me, 'Why, you did! You have! And you've got her body in there now, Mr. Bantreagh!'

" 'That's right,' I told her. 'No sense in trying to fool you. I hit her over the head with my truck crank because she'd been nagging me about you, Lilybelle. Now the deck's all clear for you and me. What'll it be—Niagara Falls?'

"Wanting to just take it along in stride with her. Just joking, like a fellow does with a girl when she's pretty."

The young deputy, competent and cool, looked at him with alert and steady eyes, as gray as the dawn.

"For Pete's sake," he said, "is that all, Mr. Bantreagh? I thought you might know something about this fellow she had been stepping out with. But you don't even know for sure that there was anybody. She might have bought her stockings and lingerie stuff herself, with some grocery money that she had held out on you. Here she is dead. Somebody killed her. But all you can tell about is how you covered up your kids and the pajamas they were wearing and thinking for a minute you saw her on the back porch when you were starting to crank your truck, only it was just the vine leaves and moonlight, and then some kidding conversation you had with this Lilybelle babe, to keep her from starting any gossip. But how is that telling anything about who killed her?" He shook his head with an exhalation of his flat diaphragm. "If it wasn't murder I could almost laugh," he said. "Maybe she didn't have any boy friend. Maybe nobody killed her."

"Oh, yes, she did," said John Bantreagh. "Oh, yes, he killed her. I drove on into the village after leaving Lilybelle. Everything was all dark and shut up, except the Waldorf All-Nite lunch wagon on the square across from the library. I went in there and the coun-

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terman was behind the counter, and a truck driver or somebody eating a piece of pie. I asked what time the library had closed tonight. And the counterman said it had closed at five o'clock; it wasn't ever open at night.

"I said to him, had he seen a lady in a white dress with big red polka dots on it, and white shoes, with light-brown wavy hair and hazel eyes, and plucked eyebrows and a red mouth, about twenty-nine? And he said there was a lady like that who sometimes came in between eleven and midnight and got sandwiches or things like that and took them out to her boy friend in their car, but she hadn't been in tonight. It was almost two o'clock now, he said, and so she probably wouldn't be in now.

"Then the truck driver spoke up and asked me if she lived on Jaybird Road and if she hung around the Swamp Run culvert bridge in the evenings, about half a mile out of town. I said yes, I reckoned she lived somewhere up that way. He said that he had seen her half a dozen times when he was going along Jaybird Road, sitting on the abutment of the culvert bridge in the evenings, like she was waiting for someone. And he had given her his horn and the high sign, only he was generally in a hurry, and there were babes like her along every road, and he could have all of them he wanted. But one time last month, he said, he had came coasting towards the culvert bridge with his engine off—there's a grade down before it, and he was a little low on gas—and he saw her sitting there, not knowing anyone was near. She was stretching out her nylon legs and tightening up her garters to some black-lace things she had on. And she had looked up just as his truck rolled to her and had smiled at him.

"It had driven him kind of wild," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "He had stopped his truck and jumped out to grab her. Just then he had looked around, and there was a car that was stopping at the side of the road, just off the culvert bridge, about twenty feet away in the shadows under the trees. There was some man in it, looking at him. He had let go of her and had jumped back into his truck again and driven off.

" 'What are you looking for her for?' he said to me. 'Are you trying to make her yourself? Brother, if I was you, I wouldn't! I'm big and plenty tough myself, and I'm not scared of anything. But there was something about that guy. . . .Your wife?' he said—I guess I must have said something—'If she was my wife, with those black-lace things and that smile she had, I'd kill her!'

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"So I knew." John Bantreagh swallowed. "But I had known when I found those nylons and things. I reckon I had kind of known all along, if I had thought about it. I drove around looking for her," he said tonelessly. "Along every road I came to. It was just breaking dawn when I came along the back road here. I saw something white off in the meadow and I drove in through the break in the fence and found her. It kind of knocked me out."

The breath of dawn air across the silvered grass stirred the ends of the young deputy's black knit tie on his expanse of snow-white shirt. He stood motionless with fists on hips. There was nothing else stirring about his hard towering figure or about the world. Only John Bantreagh's knees, which caved and caved.

No, his knees weren't caving any more. It was just a lingering of ceased sensation.

"Who was he?" the calm, alert voice of Deputy Roy Clade came to him. "I guess this counterman and this truck driver wouldn't know. But what did he look like? Did they say?"

"They didn't get a look at him," said John Bantreagh. "When she had come into the Waldorf he had always stayed in his car across the street, with his lights out in the blackness under the trees around the square. The truck-driving fellow didn't see what he looked like, either. He just got scared and jumped in his truck and drove away."

"Cagey," commented Roy Clade. "He was taking care that nobody saw him with her, if he ever had to get rid of her like he did. Maybe he knew from his experience that these married ones are hard to ditch. What kind of a car did he have, did they say?"

"They didn't know the make," said Bantreagh. "It was just a black sedan."

"Nine cars out of ten—" said Roy Clade, "nine out of ten are black sedans. I've got one myself. There's nothing in that, unless they got his license number. And they wouldn't have, if he was that cagey. He would have had his plates muddied over."

"No, they didn't get his license number," said Bantreagh. "Nobody ever did, I reckon, that saw her with him. He was cagey, like you say."

The big young deputy shook his head. "It's not any good, I'm afraid, Mr. Bantreagh," he said. "Nobody knows who he is, where he lives, what he looks like, the number of his car license, or anything. Just this counterman and this truck driver who knew that she had been stepping out with some man that had a car, and

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maybe two or three more people here or around who may have seen her getting into it with him from a distance when it was getting dark, or getting out of it below the place next to yours when he brought her home. He was awful cagey. He did it, all right, I reckon. But he'll get away with it, as sometimes happens. I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Bantreagh, but I'm afraid the police have been left with nothing to go on at all."

John Bantreagh rubbed his forehead. So much—so much to forget. That he would try to forget. That he must keep from the kids forever. So much to forget, even of bright and tender things, of when he had been younger and she had been so very young, no older than Lilybelle, and all the world had been pink-colored and full of joy.

He had known that he could never give her all she wanted. It hadn't been her fault that it had come to this. It had been his. If he had only been a little smarter. Though it could not be mended now. So much to forget, of shame and grief and failure. But some small, trivial thing to remember. And now he had remembered it.

"Nothing to go on, except what she told me," he said.

"What she told you?" said Deputy Roy Clade. "I thought you said that she had never told you anything. That you never knew a thing about it or had the least suspicion until last night."

He stood motionless. His eyes were gray as the dawn. John Bantreagh lifted his blurred bloodshot gaze and met Roy Clade's gray eyes.

"What she told me after I had found her," said John Bantreagh. "Just before she died."

"You mean—" said Roy Clade, with the muscles moving on his face. "You mean that she was still alive? You mean that she told you? Why, you're crazy, you damn apple-knocking liar! She'd been dead since one o'clock!"

His right fist jerked from his hip. He jerked it upward against his shoulder, with a contorted look on his face and his mouth opening in a scream.

John Bantreagh had got his right arm in motion. He had swung it, stepping in on knees swift and wiry, no longer caving, cracking the truck crank across the bones of Roy Clade's thick, strong wrist as the young deputy's fist left his hip. With his wrist against his shoulder Roy Clade screamed.

John Bantreagh snapped his left hand forward, grabbed the gun out of its holster, dropped his crank, side-stepping. He had the

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gun in his right hand now, and the hammer back.

"Both hands out from your shoulders!" he said. "No use to yell at me and damn me! Heel! You know what this is. You know how it shoots. Heel, and swing your arms slowly back behind you till I have got your handcuffs on!

"Maybe she didn't tell me," he said, with a dry gasp in his throat. "But you did! Here I was beside her body, with blood on my hand, with the crank that might have been the thing that knocked her out, with my truck tracks leading right up to her, and no other tracks but them on the field! Here I was, her husband, the first man in the world to be suspicioned, even if there was nothing to show that I had ever been around here at all!

"Here I was, that had drunk whiskey tonight, that had given a pair of nylons to Lilybelle after she was dead! That had told Lilybelle I had killed her and had her body in my truck! That had gone in and talked to the counterman and the truck driver kind of wild, and maybe said that I would kill her when I found her—I don't know. A man gets to talking wild when he thinks of his wife and those black-lace things, and his man's pride.

"Here I was, with everything saying it was me! Why, my best friends would have thought sure I'd done it! They would have figured some reason why—Lilybelle, or some argument we'd had about the kids, or about some fellow that she'd been stepping out with—wouldn't make any difference who. They would all have said that I had done it. At the least you might have asked me if I had. But you knew I hadn't done it. Only the man who had killed her himself, in all this world, would know that! No need to swear at me. Hold your hands behind you! You know what this is against your back.

"It took me a long time to figure out," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "I was knocked out. Just like a dummy. But I told you what her name was and you pretended never to have heard it before. I didn't tell you how to spell it, though—I didn't think that you might write it down. Everybody who just hears it thinks it's spelled *t-r-y,* like 'pantry.' I always have a lot of trouble getting it spelled right. Thought sometimes of changing it myself. But you spelled it right without being told, when you wrote it down in your notebook. I've been trying to think how you knew, ever since you did.

"And other things you didn't think of, I reckon! You've got that tire iron in your car's tool kit or in your garage at home—you

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must still have it, you've mentioned it so often. And even if you've washed it with soap and water or kerosene there will still be blood in the pores of the iron, that will show in some of these machines that they have these days, I reckon that you know. There will be blood on your car cushions. Maybe on the shirt and suit you wore last night.

"And you went home and slept," John Bantreagh said, "while I was out looking on every road for her all night! And got up and took a bath and shaved and rubbed yourself with sweet-smelling shaving lotion and put on a clean white shirt and your crisp black suit and your black knit tie, and came on back here to park just inside the woods' edge off the road, to wait for her to be discovered. Only I was already here when you came.

"There'll be the blood! There's her name, that you knew how to spell. And somewhere—yes, somewhere, when they get to looking, no matter how careful and cagey you tried to be—there will be someone that has seen you and her together, when they go looking into it, and can tie you up in an iron way.

"Get into the back of your car! No need to blaspheme me. Kneel on the floor! I'm going to have to put some of my truck lashings around you. You're powerful, and your brain is fresh and new-slept and smart. But I don't think you're going to get away. I'll try to get you to the doctor as quick as I can. I'm sorry I had to hit so hard.

"Kneel on the floor, and pray!" John Bantreagh said. "I wouldn't have ever known who you were. Nobody would have ever known about you, with nothing to start them looking into you. They would have put it on me, her husband, caught with her, caught red-handed, caught with motive, and I'd have got twenty years or life. And what would have happened to the kids is more than I can bear to think. The fear of it made my knees cave. It made me so blind that I could hardly see. If you had asked me whether I had done it I would have fallen dead away. But it won't be that way. You told me."

John Bantreagh looked at that still form lying in front of his truck wheels, with her staring eyes. "Perhaps," he said, "she helped."

"Q"

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Florence V. Mayberry

Hong Kong or Wherever

They met on a tourist junk in Hong Kong harbor—the lonely, vulnerable American widow and the man in brown with the beautiful British voice; the rich widow and the insignificant man who looked like a "nothing" . . . You can't see a ghost except in the dark. Or can you? You can't escape from a ghost, here, there, in Hong Kong, or wherever. Or can you? . . .

The junk bounced gently between Kowloon and Hong Kong, heading beyond the harbor confines to the open China Sea on the far side of Hong Kong Island. It was just into twilight, the sky silky gray, lights spilling down Victoria Peak. I sat alone near the prow of the tourist junk on the lower deck. From the upper deck came the scattered, muted sound of talk, with now and again a shrill squeal as one of the women tourists glimpsed some unusual sight. Behind me there was the clink of glasses as the bartender prepared drinks at a gloomy little bar.

I was thinking: All alone. I didn't know I would be this lonely, what kind of a life is this? Out in Hong Kong, or wherever I might chance to wander, rich, free, and alone. Better if I had stayed in Evanston, Illinois, attending the odd class at Northwestern, knitting, walking a poodle. Except, Evanston was where Harry had died.

Harry, I said to myself, damn you to hell, which is where you've probably gone, you made enough of it here for me.

And then Harry was with me, there on the junk, standing behind me where I couldn't see his grin with its great spread of teeth and wet lips. I knew he was there, I felt him; these past few weeks I was always feeling him near me, following me. He was behind me with his great paw of a hand sticking out a fat finger ready to dig me in the ribs. I could feel the pulse waves of his laugh, a laugh like a bear's if a bear could laugh—*Huhh Huhh Huhh——give us a hug Molly Baby a hug for Harry——come on smooch your old man!*

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I sprang up from the long seat that lined the junk's side, walked rapidly to the other side of the deck, as far from Harry as I could. I didn't realize I was leaning over the side until the bartender called, "Missy! You sick?"

I drew back from the choppy swells and shook my head. "You want dlink?"

"Ginger ale, please," I said, and sat down to stare at the dark, cluttered family junks scudding around the jampacked community of Water People huddled against the Kowloon side of the harbor. Supper fires glimmered on their decks, laundry was still flying on ropes strung from the masts, high-pitched chatter was rising and floating away. Nobody alone on those junks. But the very thought of being crowded into the midst of such human closeness, sweat, hands, smells, bodies—no!

The steward handed me a glass of ginger ale, his face concerned. As I took it I saw behind him the man in brown. An insignificant man, shoulders hunched forward, head drawn into them, smiling apologetically.

"I beg your pardon," he said in a beautiful British voice. "If I'm intruding, just tell me to go away. But since we seem to be the only ones traveling singly on this trip, perhaps you'd like to talk a bit?"

His voice was hesitant, a mere shade from obsequious. He looked so innocuous I was certain he would be boring. But better bored than to have Harry's ghost creeping behind me on great padded bear feet, lunging, grabbing—*Got you Molly Baby give your old man a snuggle Baby!*

"Please, I'd like to talk," I said.

He sat beside me. Not close. I had been tensed for that, ready to scoot away, to make it plain I didn't care to be close to anyone. "I've just arrived from Calcutta," he said. "Wanted to see a bit of Hong Kong. First time back since I was a young boy, don't seem to remember much except for the harbor. You're American, aren't you?"

I nodded. Then became annoyed because he had decided what I was before I had told him. "How do you know? Have I revealed my flat crude accent?"

"Oh, please. I meant to be complimentary. It's the way you look." He seemed gently amused, as though my flash of feminine temper was pleasing. "American women have a free, swinging way about them as though they own the world but have had it so

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long they're not aware of their ownership." He hesitated momentarily. "American men, now, they're something different." He slipped back into his obsequious expression. "But you'll have an American husband, so I suppose I shouldn't commit myself on American men."

I shrugged. "I'm a widow."

He ducked farther into himself, his shoulders reaching toward his face. It was really astonishing how much of a "nothing" he could become. Actually he was quite a large solid man. Yes, almost as large as Harry. But such a difference. This man so soft and gentle when he spoke. Harry almost maudlin with noise. "Terribly sorry," he said. "But of course I was much too general about American men. The British can be overbearing too. Perhaps it's just that we're not so open about it."

"Hypocritical?"

His laugh was understated, smooth. How delightful, how refreshing, how charmingly frank, his expression said. "Vulnerable spot, hypocrisy, so many of the human race share in it. Yes, you've caught us out, we British I mean. We're noted for looking bland, while feeling quite differently. Giving myself away, eh? Possibly we're annoyed at the American man *looking* as if he owns the world, when we're quite sure we *do* own it. Oh, look, watch that large junk skim past the harborline of the Hong Kong side. Quite a picture, what?"

Yes. Quite a picture. Exotic, entrancing. Which is why I was in Hong Kong. Before that, Singapore, Samoa, Australia, anywhere, everywhere, for the past six months, frantic to exchange the pictures on the inside of my mind for those on the outside.

"Fascinating," I agreed. "Tomorrow I'll see it all from Victoria Peak. It should be a beautiful panorama."

A young couple walked past us, the girl in bright yellow slacks and striped cotton jersey. She climbed out on the prow of the junk, beyond the seats, wrapped her arms around her knees, threw back her head to the warm gentle breeze. "You're braver than I am," the boy said to her. "Too close to the drink for me."

"Who thinks he owns the world?" I asked the man beside me. "That boy is American, but he sounds as mild as—" I stopped short of saying "as mild as you look."

"I do look rather like a nothing, don't I?" Not disturbed, merely quizzical.

I hesitated. "Well, yes," I said deliberately. "If you must go pry-

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ing into minds you'll have to take the bad with the good."

He laughed again. Then, as though he felt he had gone too far, the laugh switched to an unctuous smile and he began pointing out places of interest. The only ones that stuck in my mind were the squatters' hovels, smudged in as dark shadows between the brightly lighted homes of the wealthy. Squatters without lights or water, clinging to the sheerness of mountainside and life, tenaciously refusing to give up. Why? I kept thinking, why endure so much just to live?

But I knew why. I was born in a Chicago tenement, Polish, and stayed there until I was 17. Four in a bed when I was small, cut down to two sisters and me when we grew too big for four. At 17 I quit clinging and climbed to a rented room with a hot plate. All by myself. Alone for the first time in my life.

Clinging is easy, it's the climbing that's hard. It took a lot of climbing to find Harry. The boss. The Big boss. Owned the downtown Chicago building—that and a lot more—where I ran the elevator. So I climbed to the mountaintop. And after a while all I wanted to do was jump off. But people don't. They hang onto life. Like Harry, reaching, motioning, the blood streaming from his mouth—

"You know a great deal about Hong Kong," I said desperately. Talk to me, keep talking.

"Not really. Only around the harbor, because as a boy I was taken sailing here and it's changed the least. The war came, you know. Japanese prison camp for the British, my father was a Navy officer. So they scraped up our family and tucked us away. Boring waste of time. Can't blame the Japanese, though. We would have done the same to them. But this must sound like ancient history to you."

"I've read books," I said. "But in case you're wondering how old I am, I'm thirty-one." None of his business, why had I bothered to tell him? Nobody's business about me. Especially that of men who might be eager to comfort a lonely vulnerable widow. And her money.

"I was thirteen when I went to prison camp," he said. "Look, you'll find this section interesting, it's quite famous. Aberdeen, the main settlement of the Water People in Hong Kong. Perhaps you'll want to get out a bit of change, they'll be begging around our junk as we near the restaurant."

Ahead the gaudy lights of the Floating Restaurants sparked the

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dusky sky. Sampans darted from the protecting flanks of the family junks, skimmed toward the tourist junk. Women and children called out, voices high-pitched and nasal, hands pleading upward. I felt in my purse, found coins, tossed them. But the throw was too high and the coins fell into the dark sea.

The children screamed at me, their faces incensed by this foolish loss. Their anger struck me like a blow, a reminder of impoverished childhood when a lost penny was tragedy. But more than that, a reminder of fate. My aim was always missing its mark. Like with Harry. So rich, so glamorous with possessions. Fat even became him when he was 35 and I was 19.

"Shall we dine together?" the man in brown asked, very formally.

A fleeting wish crossed my mind to be in evening dress, in a beautiful supper club, a sparkling place for lovely clothes and happiness, instead of nothing ahead except eating a Chinese dinner with a stranger.

"Perhaps we can do it another time, I would like that too," the man in brown said gently.

I stared, mouth parted. His eyes probed mine. Strange eyes, pale blue, unreadable as though under a sheath of glass. It was an effort to turn away. I leaned over the railing, but the cries and reaching hands in the sampans whirled me back toward the man.

Our junk bumped against the gangway of the lighted restaurant. The man in brown tucked his hand under my arm, helped me up the gangway, and led me to a large round table where tourists were already being seated. In desperation I struck up a conversation with a friendly couple from Indiana, anything to avoid the man beside me. Finally he touched my arm. I turned.

"Forgive me, I realize I'm often disturbing. But"—and he shrugged—"I can't rid myself of this ability to read minds any more than I can rid myself of my arm. Short of cutting off the arm, of course, or getting a lobotomy for my brain. But too drastic, don't you think? Besides, reading minds is a great aid to me. I'm a professional analyst, a clinical psychologist. In industry. And to do a bit of mind reading saves time."

I willed my own mind to go blank. But it bubbled like a seething cauldron, as though his gaze was a stirring spoon, digging at its bottom, bringing lost thoughts to the surface.

"Would you rather I went away?"

"Yes," I said.

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"After I finish dinner." The cringing set of his shoulders became pronounced, but his eyes were amused. "I'm very hungry."

I wasn't. The strange fish things which had started as delicious now tasted like the harbor, defiled by those thousands of crowded, screaming, born-and-die people in those thousands of junks. I began to think of the catfish Harry had brought me when we went to his Ozark fishing lodge on our honeymoon, how he held the revolting thing before my face, pushing it at me to hear me scream, grinning at me—both Harry and the fish—the fish with rubbery spikes around its mouth ready to stab me.

That was the first time I had noticed how big and yellow Harry's teeth were, how his breath as he laughed at me spewed the smell of cigars he continually chewed. He actually put the catfish on my arm, only to tease me he said later. Because I had fainted.

"Are you ill?" It was the friendly woman from Indiana, her face concerned. I realized then that my eyes were frozen into a stare. I shook my head. "No, it's just I don't care much for fish."

After the fruit was served, the man in brown excused himself. Soon we all left for the return to Kowloon. Our junk slid past new housing projects for workers, the huge buildings like enormous henneries with the lights left on to make the hens lay more. People, and more a-borning, stacked layer on layer, my God! The closeness, the intolerable intimacy!

Then I heard, unmistakably, a voice. Not outside. Inside. A voice that kept asking: Why are you frightened, why are you frightened? Over and over. But it wasn't my inner voice. It was British, insinuating, the voice of the man in brown worming into the crevices of my mind where he had no business to be. I whirled, expecting to see him behind me.

But he was on the opposite side of the deck, looking toward the dark open sea spotted with the speeding lights of small boats. For a sickening instant I wished Harry were back, booming, pawing Harry as a buffer against this mind-reading stranger. Like a cannon set off in a prayer room, Harry was. I could never think when he was in a room with me. Only when he left it.

The junk slipped into the Kowloon wharf. I hurried through the streets, past cooking cauldrons on the sidewalks where Chinese waited for late-night suppers, into the gaudy shopping district with stores still open, merchants hawking wares to the crowds walking up and down. It was late, but nobody bothered me. Except for staring.

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Perhaps I looked frightened. Perhaps that made them stare. Except that men—even women, but in a different way—always stared at me. Harry did, all the years we were married. *Molly Baby the way you look is really something I really bought me a Baby Doll I did——don't kid your old man Molly it was money not love give us a kiss.* Grab, pull, snatch. Of course he had the right. That's what Harry and the law said. He was my husband. *Baby I could drown in those smoky dark eyes you got lips like rosé petals.* Almost twelve years.

"I belong to myself, why couldn't you understand that!" I said to myself.

But I must have said it out loud. "I quite understand. Of course you do," a British voice said behind me.

I whirled. The man in brown—he hadn't yet told me his name, nor had I told mine—was smiling at me. "One does not give away, easily, a valuable possession."

"Why are you following me?"

"I'm sorry." Obsequious again. "Really I wasn't following you. My hotel's this way. And you're headed in my direction, possibly going to the same hotel. Tell you what, we'll exchange places. I'll walk ahead and you follow. Very oriental."

He bowed slightly, went around me, and walked toward the tall hotel, with the Sikh doorman pacing in front of it. It was the first time I became aware of his back. I hadn't noticed it before, only his meek, fawning face. Seen from the front, his shoulders seemed bent in a half bow. But from the back they were massive, hugely muscled, bent forward by the weight and power. His arms were extraordinarily long. They swung loosely, ending in great blobs of hands.

From the back he looked like Harry. A great hulking bear of a man. No, no, he couldn't be! He couldn't be possessed by Harry, motivated by a dead man. He was a stranger, he came from Calcutta, how could Harry have found him—or could he? Ghosts have no barriers.

At the hotel entrance the man turned, looked back briefly, his milk-toast face smiling. No. Not Harry.

The next morning was lovely, shining. I forgot the dreams and tremors of the night before. I felt like a child in an amusement park as the cable car climbed steep Victoria Peak, giving a slant-visioned view of Hong Kong below. I'm happy, I'm having fun, why shouldn't I be happy, I was thinking as I left the cable

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car at the top of the peak.

It was a different suit, this time tan with brown overplaid. But the same strange, hulking man, buying picture postcards from a woman vendor. Following me! No, he had come ahead, had been waiting for me—I had said so the night before.

I hurried past him, looking straight ahead. When I was a good distance away, out on a ledge where a spyglass was placed for viewing the harbor, I turned.

His back was toward me. And it had been no night trick of vision. He did look like Harry, his back massive, its hunch predatory, the muscles clearly defined even in well-tailored coat sleeves. His figure grew larger and larger, pushing out the air and space until I was breathless. I hurried, almost running, past him and the souvenir stand toward the tour bus that was waiting.

Next stop, the Tiger Balm Gardens. Hideous, demonic. Filled with grotesque figures caught in still-life agonies, materialized from the demons who sometimes hovered over me in the dark as I tried to sleep. Tortuous stairways winding into hot balconies that led into other stairways seeming to go nowhere.

And on one of the stairways I felt Harry behind me. Perspiration ran cold down my back. My skin crawled with the knowledge that Harry's great ghost hands hovered above my shoulders, ready to pull me toward him. I turned, hands spread to push him away.

The British stranger stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up, smiling.

I ran up the stairs, across a balcony, down another stairway, crossed an open space to another flight. When I was halfway up, the stranger came in view, started down. I went backward, stumbled. His arm reached forward, grotesquely long, his fingers open, grasping. He caught my head, steadied me. Smiling gently.

He said, "Why are you frightened? Are you ill? You do look ill, perhaps it is too warm for you, you're not used to the tropics."

I pulled my hand free, pressed against the stairway's wall.

"Surely you're not frightened of me, obviously I'm a harmless sort of chap. Even though it's true, yes, I did come on this tour today because you said you would be on it. But nothing frightening about that, why blame a man for wanting to be better acquainted with a woman so—fascinating." Gentle. Talking softly, as though I were a horse to be gentled. I had heard the groom talk that way to Harry's thoroughbreds in Kentucky.

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"I—I'm not frightened. It's—you read minds. It isn't normal to read minds."

"Oh, yes." He nodded. "Difficult to be around that trait in this day and age. Perhaps in future, when everyone does it, it will be easier. Force a new morality. You know, evil thoughts will become evil deeds. Or perhaps they do even now. But, my dear, a lovely creature like you shouldn't worry about thoughts. You'll be forgiven, you know."

He took my hand again. I trembled, but I let it stay. "Such a lovely girl, but lovelier if you were not troubled. You're unique, you know. Outwardly the exquisite stillness of a Greek statue. But inwardly a trapped bird, fluttering, seeking escape. From what?"

Prying, probing! I jerked away. "Do you intend to follow me until I leave Hong Kong?"

"Well"—an oblique smile—"if I do you'll have no escape, will you? That is, if I truly read minds. I'll know where you plan to be. So why not be friendly and enjoy this brief stay in Hong Kong? You'll be leaving tomorrow."

I hadn't told him I would. I hadn't even told the hotel. I had only told myself this morning on Victoria Peak when I first saw him.

"Why not have dinner with me tonight? In some unusual place, something very posh and oriental. I'm staying at your hotel. Samuels is my name. Francis Samuels, Mrs. Sanders."

That wasn't mind reading: it's simple to discover names in a hotel.

I nodded agreement. Better to know where he was than to feel him hulking after me like a nemesis. "Dinner then. Now, please, I'm going back to my bus."

At the bus I turned. Samuels was on an upper balcony, his huge hateful back toward me, blended into the Tiger Balm Gardens, a gargoyle among gargoyles.

The bus was empty of tourists, they were still occupied with the Gardens. The bus driver stood outside, talking with other drivers. But I wasn't alone. Harry was waiting for me. I felt his great hams of legs settle beside me. I couldn't see his hand—you can't see a ghost except in the dark—but its shadow moved on my knee.

"Go away, Harry," I said. "For God's sake, go away."

For God's sake I'm staying Molly—shows no hard feelings—God

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may give you a gold star for that lovey you're too pretty to be mad give us a love sweetie.

Loud. The way he always talked. Inside my mind, hurting it, pummeling it with his laugh—*Huhuhuhuhuh!*

"You sick, Missy?" The bus driver was leaning over me. I became aware that my face was pressed against the window, my hands clawing at its glass. Despite the air-conditioned coolness I dripped with perspiration.

"You bettah soon," the driver assured me. "Next stop, Repulse Bay, sit under tree by watah. I call othahs soon."

But the soft breeze from the sea did no good. All I wanted was to get back to the hotel, go to bed—no, better still, pack and leave today. For where? Japan. Yes, Japan. Cool and clean, perhaps near Mount Fuji. In some small secluded inn where no one spoke English and, if they did, would be too polite to ask questions. I would hire a maid to stay in the room with me, to keep Harry away.

The late day flights into Japan were filled. I made a reservation for the following morning, took two aspirins, and went to bed.

Mollylovey gotchagotcha——Harry's got his pretty little baby.

I swam away from Harry, under deep water, struggling for breath. Any moment the water would choke me, gurgle into my lungs. Then I would be helpless. Harry's arms would encircle me like an octopus, I would go down, down. Yes, I was down, down! With Harry's face pressed into mine, his eyes big and astonished. The water around us turned blackish red. One of us was bleeding. It was I, exploding from the water's pressure and Harry's arms. I gasped, made a feeble lunge—

I sat upright in the hotel bed, my heart fluttering and plunging. Then I saw the blood on the sheet. My nose was bleeding. I went to the bathroom, let ice water run on a washcloth, placed it on my neck.

Still half in the bad dream, I jumped at the knock on my door. I crept to the door, shaking, frightened.

It was a bellboy. He handed me a small translucent florist's box containing an orchid corsage. The note inside read: "Dinner at eight seems a good time. I will be waiting in the lobby. Francis Samuels."

Six o'clock now. Like an actor in a slow-motion film, merely playing a shadowy part, I began to bathe and dress.

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I wore a white dress, sheath-slim to the ankle, its slit past the knee outlined in silver, the orchid at my shoulder. At first I didn't recognize Samuels, he looked so much like a waiter in his short white dinner jacket, his shoulders bent as though taking an order. But waiters in Kowloon are not Caucasian.

"How beautiful. As always." Fawning. "What a tragedy for your husband. To lose you."

"I lost him. He died, we were not separated."

"Yes, you told me." Very gently. "But surely his loss of you was the worst pang of death. He must have wished—but let us be happy tonight. I've looked up what I think will be a superb restaurant, a choice of several Chinese cuisines, would you like that?"

My neck felt stiff as I nodded. I knew what he had left unsaid: Your husband must have wished you would die along with him. Did you, Harry, did you want to kill me?

The restaurant was shadowy, the tables separated by filigreed black and gold screens, the waiters in brocade Chinese dress. Samuels ordered. The delicate exotic food almost made me ignore his hulking presence, simply enjoy each delicious surprise. At the finish the waiter brought sizzling-hot candied lotus seeds, dipped them with chopsticks into a bowl of cracked ice, and placed fragrant servings on our dessert plates.

"It was a lovely dinner. Thank you," I said.

"We can have many more." So soft his voice, so beguiling, so insinuating.

I tried to look at him squarely. Only my head began to hurt, it was such an effort to outstare that bland fixed gaze. "Remember, you told me yourself I'm leaving tomorrow? With all this world to move about in, it isn't very likely we shall ever see each other again."

He chuckled as though I had said something adorable. "And you're thinking, 'not if I can help it.' My dear, you're so troubled and lonely. Besides being extraordinarily beautiful. You'll not be able to make it through life alone. You need someone with strength and understanding. And with—shall we say?—quite a lot of forgiveness in his nature."

"I like being alone."

He shrugged, smiled in a humoring way. "I've lived in the East since I was five years old. So by this time I'm quite oriental, not much British left. Therefore I resign myself to fate. So, dear Mrs.

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Sanders, perhaps we'll share many dinners. Perhaps not. If not, I shall have to accept my loss."

He kept his gaze on me, holding my eyes until they couldn't leave his. He reached across the table and took my hand. "Terribly troubled," he said.

That stifled sensation Harry always gave me grabbed my breath, stuffed it back into my lungs, stale and poisonous, making me ill and giddy. It was agony to imagine seeing this hulking, probing stranger day after day, night after night. But worse, no longer a stranger.

I jumped up, ran out the restaurant entrance, down the stairs. I would catch a taxi while he settled the bill. At the hotel I would complain to the management, alert the hotel detective, hang up if Samuels telephoned.

A taxi crept toward me, held back by people scuttling back and forth across the narrow street. A big hand gripped my elbow. When the taxi came, Samuels assisted me into the car, moved in beside me.

"You're in no condition to go back to the hotel yet. Alone." He leaned toward the driver. "Drive around, we would like to see the city."

"I'll call the police!"

"And what will you tell them?" Hateful voice! Gentle on the surface, but underneath coiling, ready to strike at my words. "That we had dinner in a restaurant, quite open to the public, and now are sightseeing in a public conveyance? A kidnaping? No, they'll think it is a lovers' quarrel, laugh, and wave us on."

Yes, it was silly. I knew that. All the man had said was "Terribly troubled." Then I ran.

"I want to go to the hotel. I must pack."

"This is your first visit to Kowloon, what a pity not to see it."

I looked out the taxi window at the people going up and down, in and out of stores, free to do what they wanted. Or were they? How many of those blurred faces really were like mine—pale and smooth, hovering like a mirage over the real face beneath. How many of those faces had a Harry who wouldn't let them alone, who used people like Samuels all over the world to keep them prisoners forever?

"You are very frightened, and you need help," Samuels said. "As I told you, I'm a clinical psychologist. And I know you badly need a new security. Now, be sensible. A quirk of fate brought us

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ogether. Perhaps I'm no fonder of it than you are. It's not completely pleasant to be attracted by a woman who's running from a nightmare connected with another man. Even if she is beautiful. And even if she falls into my line of profession." He patted my stiff icy hand. I drew away. Why didn't he add: Even if she is rich? There are ways of looking it up, he could have found out.

Neither of us spoke. Neither of us looked at the street scene sliding by. Finally he said, "Why run from your husband? He's dead. That's final."

He said he could read minds, I thought he could read minds. But it wasn't true. Otherwise he would know Harry wasn't final, that Harry was following me around, that there was no place I could go, Hong Kong or wherever, without Harry being there too. Making people like Samuels poke and pry and say terrible things to me.

I sat, congealed, and willed death. Not for me. For Samuels. Perhaps if Harry saw that he couldn't use people he would go away.

"You'll not die," Samuels said. "There's no use wishing you could die."

Stupid, stupid Samuels, wrong again. I never wanted to die!

"Take me to the Golden Emperor Hotel," I told the driver. "At once. This man is annoying me."

The driver turned, grinning, wheeled the taxi about.

"Sit away from me, you—" What terrible epithet could I use to Samuels? "You bloody fake!" Maybe he wouldn't be too oriental for that.

Samuels' face darkened. "Don't be ridiculous! Of course you can go to the hotel. Americans are so hysterical."

I slapped his superior smile. His hand flipped up. Then he sighed, dropped his hand, settled back in the seat. "Good thing you've no weapon in that pretty purse. Except perhaps a nail file. Although a nail file with the wrong emotion behind it can be nasty. Well, my dear, I'll not bother you any longer. Suppose I lost the knack of reading thoughts? You could be a widow twice over."

I swung the back of my hand against his mouth. My large sapphire ring cut his lip and blood spurted. One of his hands flew toward his mouth, the other toward me. But I already had the taxi door open. I leaped and fell on the curb. Someone picked me up. I pushed him aside and ran. Anywhere. The wrong way it was. But

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another taxi took me to the hotel to face stares in the lobby at my dirt-streaked dress, its slit ripped to my thigh.

Early in the morning I left the hotel. There was no sign of Samuels in the lobby. I hurried to the waiting limousine, terrified he might be waiting in it. But I was alone, no one else was going to the airport.

At the airport I sifted the milling passengers down to each individual to make sure Samuels hadn't arrived ahead of me.

At last I was on the plane to Osaka. No Samuels on it, his meek face camouflaging his lunging-bear back. Insinuating I had killed Harry: You could be a widow twice over. Harry had died in bed, in his own comfortable bed, with nurses around the clock, the best specialist. I even had an autopsy performed. Harry had bled to death of perforated ulcers. The nurse on duty was in the kitchen drinking coffee, she didn't come to help him. She said his bell didn't ring, that she thought I was with him. Trying to wiggle out of a tight spot, she was!

He had bled too long. That's all.

Give old Harry a hug Mollybaby little old kiss for Harry.

Harry was back.

In the vacant seat beside me.

I might have known I couldn't lose him. The polite Japanese stewardess ignored him as she handed me a pillow. Of course. She couldn't see Harry, not even I could. But I felt him there. His hand was creeping up my arm, around my shoulder.

I didn't scream. I know I didn't scream. I didn't hear myself scream, I would know, wouldn't I? The stewardess said I screamed, but it must have been someone else. I wish she would take that oxygen mask off my face, I'm having enough trouble breathing. It's the fog, there's fog in this plane, everything is gray.

I wish I could swallow my heart, it's stuck in my throat.

Harry's going to kill me. I know he is. So I'll have to stay with him forever. It's revenge, he thinks I murdered him. "Harry, I didn't murder you!"

Molly you tough little rascal you watched me bleed——had me helpless in bed the nurse away kept telling me you hated me you wished I'd die——so I did Baby couldn't deny you anything Baby.

"I never touched you, I only sat beside you. Is it murder to sit beside a man who is dying from bleeding ulcers?"

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Huhuhuhuh trying to kid your old man—got me bleeding then you ran out of the room.

"I took a shower, nobody can hear anything in the shower. Why didn't you ring your bell for the nurse? The button was beside your bed."

Who stuffed the wad of paper in the bell button so it couldn't ring—who picked it out while the nurse called the doctor—sure you killed old Harry.

The Captain's voice came over the loudspeaker of the Osaka-bound plane, first in Japanese, then in English. "If there is a doctor on board please immediately contact a stewardess. A woman in the first-class section is seriously ill and requires immediate aid. This is an emergency. If there is a doctor on board—"

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Ellery Queen

The Little Spy

In which Ellery is invited to join one of the most exclusive clubs in the world—The Puzzle Club—and is challenged to solve the unsolvable . . .

Detective: ELLERY QUEEN

The letter was written in a secretive hand on paper as thick as a pharaoh's papyrus. Instead of a name or a crest, its engraved monogram consisted of one large, gold, ticklesome question mark.

"My dear Mr. Queen," Ellery read. "It is the pleasure of The Puzzle Club to invite you to our next regular meeting, which takes place at 7:30 P.M. Wednesday at the address below. Purpose: to offer you our membership test, which we believe without modesty will challenge your logical powers.

"Ours is a very small, congenial group. There are no dues or other obligations. You will be the only outsider present. Informal dress.

"We hope you will respond affirmatively."

None of Ellery's reference books, including the telephone directory, listed a Puzzle Club. On the other hand, the signature and address made it unlikely that this was the gambit to a mugging party or badger game. So Ellery dashed off an acceptance note; and Wednesday evening found him, at 7:30 to the tick, pushing the bell of a penthouse foyer in the nobbiest reaches of Park Avenue.

The lordly Englishman who opened the door turned out to be a butler, who took his hat and vanished; and the rumpled-looking Texan giant who greeted him was unmistakably Ellery's correspondent and host. The big man's name was Syres, and he was one of the ten wealthiest men in the United States.

"On the dot," Syres boomed. "Welcome, Mr. Queen!" He was all

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but grinding his muscular hands; and he rushed Ellery into a museum of massive Western furniture, studded leather, burnished woods, antique carpets, old masters, and twinkling crystal and copper. "I see you're admiring my traditionalism. I loathe contemporary anything." Except, Ellery thought, contemporary oil wells and the profits therefrom; but he meekly followed his host into a living room vast enough for a hidalgo's rancho.

In a moment Ellery was shaking hands with the other members of The Puzzle Club. Three were present besides Syres, and not altogether to his surprise Ellery recognized each of them. The dark, tall, mustache-eyebrowed man was the celebrated criminal lawyer, Darnell, who was being mentioned frequently these days for the next opening on the Supreme Court. The trim, short, peach-cheeked one was the noted psychiatrist, Dr. Vreeland. The third was Emmy Wandermere, the poet, a wisp of a woman with shocking blue eyes and the handclasp of a man.

Ellery gathered that The Puzzle Club was of recent origin. It had no more purpose than any other association in gamesmanship, perhaps less; and while its members were all prominently implicated in the world as it was, the Club's bylaws, he was promptly told, forbade discussion at its monthly meetings of any subject not connected with puzzles. As the psychiatric Dr. Vreeland put it, "Other people meet regularly to play bridge. We meet to mystify each other—as man has done with riddles since prehistory—in a sort of ritual adoration of the question mark."

They sat him down in a roomy armchair near the man-high fireplace, and the English butler brought him a Scotch, a napkin, and a little tray of sizzling canapés.

"And that's all you get, Mr. Queen, until the test is over," the oil man explained. "We don't eat dinner until afterward."

"The Arabs have a proverb," said Dr. Vreeland. "When the stomach speaks, wisdom is silent."

"Or as Stevenson put it," murmured Miss Wandermere, "the sort who eat unduly must never hope for glory."

"You see, Queen, we want you to be at your best," said Darnell the lawyer, staring piercingly at their victim. "Our membership rules are quite harsh. For example, application is by unanimous invitation only. Our fifth member, Dr. Arkavy, the Nobel Prize-winning biochemist, who's away at a science conference, voted by cable all the way from Moscow to invite you."

"You should understand, too," said Tycoon Syres, "that if you

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fail to solve the puzzle we're going to throw at you tonight, you'll never be invited to try again."

"Harsh, indeed," said Ellery, nodding. "You titillate me. How exactly is the puzzle propounded?"

"In story form," said the lady poet. "How else?"

"Have I the option of asking questions?"

"As many as you like," said the little psychiatrist.

"In that case," Ellery said, "you-all may fire when ready."

"It happened during World War II," the multimillionaire host began the story. "You'll remember how hectic everything was—government departments mushrooming overnight, new bureaus scrambling to get organized, all sorts of people pulled out of the woodwork to help with the war effort, and security officers going crazy with the work load suddenly dumped on their shoulders."

"In a certain very important government war-bureau newly set up," psychiatrist Vreeland said as he lit a cigar, "one of the working force taken on was a little man named Tarleton, J. Aubrey Tarleton, who came out of retirement to do his bit for Uncle Sam. J. Aubrey was an ex-civil servant with a good if undistinguished record in government service. The bureau was an essential and very sensitive one. There was no time to do more than a conventional security check, but Tarleton's long record seemed to speak for itself."

"If you had seen old Mr. Tarleton," Miss Wandermere, the poet, took up the tale, "he would have struck you as a throwback—say, someone out of the British civil service in Rudyard Kipling's day. He had a Colonel Blimp mustache, he invariably dressed in ultra-conservative clothes of Edwardian cut, he actually wore a piped vest and spats, carried a silver-headed cane, and he was never without a boutonnière pinned to his lapel, usually a white gardenia. A spic-and-span, courtly little old gentleman out of a long-dead age.

"His tastes were as elegantly old-fashioned," the lady poet went on, "as his manners. For instance, Mr. Tarleton was something of a gourmet and a connoisseur of vintages. Also, he would talk endlessly about his hobby, which was painting tiny landscapes on little ovals of ivory and ceramic—even worse, going on and on about his collection of Eighteenth Century miniatures by Richard Cosway and Ozias Humphry and other artists practically no one had ever heard of. In short, he was a good deal of a bore, and the

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younger people in the bureau especially vied with one another inventing new ways of avoiding him."

"Then something happened," Lawyer Darnell chimed in, "that threw the spotlight on little Mr. Tarleton. It was shortly before D-Day, and the dapper old gent suddenly wangled a priority airline passage to London. And just then Intelligence received an anonymous tip that Tarleton was in the pay of the Nazis—that he was a German spy. There were thousands of such tips during the war, most of them checking out as baseless, the result of malice, or spy fever, or what-have-you. But in view of Tarleton's access to top-secret material, and rather than take a chance at such a critical time, they yanked old Tarleton off the plane just as it was about to take off, and they gave him a going-over."

"This," asserted oil man Syres gravely, "was the most thorough search in the long and honorable history of spy-catching. It took a very long time, because at first it was entirely unsuccessful. In the end, of course, they found it."

"The plans for the Allied invasion of Europe, no doubt," Ellery said, smiling.

"Exactly," said Miss Wandermere, looking faintly disapproving. "The date cycle for D-Day, the location of the landings, the strength of the Allied forces—everything the German high command needed to smash the invasion in its tracks. There it was, to the last detail, all written down in plain uncoded English.

"The question you've got to answer, Mr. Queen, is a simple one. Where did the Intelligence people find the spy-message?"

"Or to put it the other way," Darnell, the criminal lawyer, said, "where did Tarleton conceal the spy-message?"

"May I rule out the plane?" Ellery asked promptly. "That is, he didn't conceal it somewhere on board just before he was grabbed? Or in his luggage, or someone else's luggage?"

"He did not."

"He didn't pass it to a confederate?"

"No."

"The message was found on his person?"

"It was."

"Well, let's see." Ellery frowned. "I assume the obvious places of possible concealment yielded nothing—hat, coats, vest, trousers, shirt, tie, shoes, socks, spats, underclothing, galoshes or rubbers, that sort of thing?" There was a general nod. "The flower in his buttonhole? It was a real flower?"

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"Nature's own," said Dr. Vreeland.

"The contents of his pockets?"

"Every object he carried in his pockets was minutely gone over, without result."

"The pockets themselves?"

"Concealed nothing."

"A secret pocket? Anywhere in his clothing?"

"No."

"Was he carrying a book?"

"No."

"A newspaper? Magazine? Directory? Any printed material whatever?"

"None."

"There must have been some printed matter in his wallet—credit cards, driver's license—"

"All carefully examined," Syres chuckled, "including, I might add, the material of the wallet itself—for secret writing. And no dice."

"Was his bare skin examined for secret writing?"

"It was, including his scalp, ears, and finger- and toenails," the oil man grinned, "and there wasn't any. They looked under infrared and ultra-violet and every other kind of light known to science. They peered at every square inch through a microscope. They used every chemical known to bring out secret writing. They even parboiled him—applied heat."

"Thorough," said Ellery dryly. "Well." He reflected. "Was he tattooed with some design that looked innocuous but actually concealed a hidden message?"

"In the naked state," Miss Wandermere assured him, "old Mr. Tarleton was as pinkly unmarred as a six-month foetus."

"And I take it the usual fluoroscope and X-ray examinations were made without turning the message up in the old spy's interior?"

"You take it correctly, Mr. Queen."

"His mustache!" Ellery said. "Under it."

"Ingenious mind, this fellow," Lawyer Darnell said admiringly. "You mean Tarleton wrote the message on his upper lip and then grew a mustache over it? Well, Intelligence thought of that. They shaved off his mustache and found nothing underneath but lip."

"Interesting." Ellery was pulling on his nose, a sure sign of deep cerebration. "Let's tackle objects that might conceal the mes-

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sage. If I hit one that's relevant, stop me . . . Watch, wrist or pocket type? Ring? Hearing aid? Hair-piece? Glass eye? Contact lenses? The shafts of eyeglasses? False teeth? False finger or toe? Any prosthetic device at all?"

"Heavens, you'll have the old traitor made up of bits and pieces, Mr. Queen," laughed the lady poet. "No to all your suggestions."

"Key ring? Card case? Cuff links? Tie clasp? Belt? Suspenders? Pipe? Tobacco pouch? Cigarettes? Cigarette case? Snuff box? Pill box?" Ellery went on and on, until he ran out of ideas. To each suggestion they shook their heads.

There was silence. The members of The Puzzle Club glanced at one another significantly.

"Buttons," Ellery said, of a sudden. "Hollowed-out buttons! No? . . . Ah, I've forgotten something!"

"What's that?" asked Darnell curiously.

"His silver-headed cane!"

But they all shook their heads, smiling. And there was silence again.

"Well, I've eliminated everything you've told me about the old boy, and lots more. Or have I?"

"To that question, Mr. Queen," said Syres, smiling even more broadly, "you'll have to provide your own answer. Fascinating problem, isn't it?"

"And damned smart Intelligence people," Ellery mourned. "Final question: What if there's more than one answer, and I hit one you haven't thought of?"

There was incredulous hilarity.

"In that case," the lady poet said, "we'd probably elect you president of the Club."

"Now, Mr. Queen," said Syres, "you may retire to my study to think, or take a walk down Park Avenue, or spend your time any way you please while chewing on the puzzle. Unfortunately, we can't let you have more than an hour. My chef Charlot's dinner won't be edible after nine o'clock. Which is your pleasure?"

"Inasmuch as all this ratiocination has made me hungry," Ellery said, grinning back, "I think I'll answer your puzzle right now."

CHALLENGE TO THE READER
Can you qualify for membership in The Puzzle Club?

"The clue," Ellery chuckled in the attentive silence, "stemmed

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from old Tarleton's hobby—his painting of miniatures. It naturally suggested that he had written the spy message in miniature—in lettering so small it could be read only through a strong magnifying glass. That much was obvious.

"The question, of course, was: On which object Tarleton carried on his person was the miniaturized spy message inscribed?

"I just questioned whether I had covered everything about the old spy that you people had mentioned in your description of him. Of course I had not. I eliminated every possible object on Tarleton's person *but one*. The message must therefore have been written in miniature on that one object.

"Old Tarleton was in the tradition of the very select few who have been able to inscribe the Gettysburg Address or the Lord's Prayer on an object no bigger than an oversized period.

"He wrote the spy message on the head of the pin that secured his flower to his lapel."

"Miss Wandermere and gentlemen," said the tycoon heartily, "I give you the newest member of The Puzzle Club!"

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Ross Macdonald

The Missing Sister Case

Most readers and critics agree that Ross Macdonald, creator of private detective Lew Archer, now wears the crown that once rested so fittingly on the head of Dashiell Hammett, and later on the head of Raymond Chandler. And there is no sign whatever in Ross Macdonald's newest work that "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." In his own detective domain Ross Macdonald is undisputed king . . .

In this novelet, "The Missing Sister Case," you will share Lew Archer's feelings—as when he feels "a worm of blood crawling past" his ear. Will "something heavier than sleep or tiredness" sit on the back of your neck, too? And as for Lew Archer's thoughts, try this one for size: this case of a missing blonde (and of missing money) is a "a nasty business," and nastiness, Archer reminds us, has a way of "rubbing off on all of us" . . .

Detective: LEW ARCHER

I picked her up on the Daylight. Or maybe she picked me up. With some of the nicest girls, you never know.

She seemed to be very nice, and very young. She had a flippant nose and wide blue eyes, the kind that men like to call innocent. Her hair bubbled like boiling gold around her small blue hat. When she turned from that window to hear my deathless comments on the landscape and the weather, she wafted spring odors toward me.

She laughed in the right places, a little hectically. But in between, when the conversation lagged, I could see a certain somberness in her eyes, a pinched look around her mouth like the effects of an early frost. When I asked her to join me in the buffet car for a drink, she said, "Oh, no. Thank you. I couldn't possibly."

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"Why not?"

"I'm not quite twenty-one, for one thing. You wouldn't want to contribute to the delinquency of a minor?"

"It sounds like a pleasant enterprise."

She veiled her eyes and turned away. The green hills plunged backward past the train window like giant dolphins against the flat blue background of the sea. The afternoon sun was bright on her hair. I hoped I hadn't offended her.

I hadn't. After a while she leaned toward me and touched my arm with hesitant fingertips.

"Since you're so kind, I'll tell you what I would like." She wrinkled her nose in an anxious way. "A sandwich? Would it cost so very much more than a drink?"

"A sandwich it is."

On the way to the diner she caught the eye of every man on the train who wasn't asleep. Even some of the sleeping ones stirred, as if her passing had induced a dream. I censored my personal dream. She was too young for me, too innocent. I told myself that my interest was strictly paternal.

She asked me to order her a turkey sandwich, all white meat, and drummed on the tablecloth until it arrived. It disappeared in no time. She was ravenous.

"Have another," I said.

She gave me a look which wasn't exactly calculating, just questioning. "Do you really think I should?"

"Why not? You're pretty hungry."

"Yes, I am. But—" She blushed. "I hate to ask a stranger—you know?"

"No personal obligation. I like to see hungry people eat."

"You're awfully generous. And I am awfully hungry. Are you sure you can afford it?"

"Money is no object. I just collected a thousand-dollar fee in San Francisco. If you can use a full-course dinner, say so."

"Oh, no, I couldn't accept that. But I will confess that I could eat another sandwich."

I signaled to the waiter. The second sandwich went the way of the first while I drank coffee. She ate the olives and slices of pickle, too.

"Feeling better now? You were looking a little peaked."

"Much better, thank you. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I hadn't eaten all day. And I've been on short rations for a week."

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I looked her over deliberately. Her dark blue suit was new, and expensively cut. Her bag was fine calfskin. Tiny diamonds winked in the white-gold case of her wrist watch.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "I could have pawned something. Only I couldn't *bear* to. I spent my last cent on my ticket—I waited till the very last minute, when I had just enough to pay my fare."

"What were you waiting for?"

"To hear from Ethel. But we won't go into that." Her eyes shuttered themselves, and her pretty mouth became less pretty. "It's my worry."

"All right."

"I don't mean to be rude, or ungrateful. I thought I could hold out until I got to Los Angeles. I would have, too, if you hadn't broken me down with kindness."

"Forget about my kindness. I hope there's a job waiting for you in Los Angeles. Or maybe a husband?"

"No." The idea of a husband, or possibly a job, appealed to her sense of humor. She giggled like a schoolgirl. "You have one more guess."

"Okay. You flunked out of school and couldn't face the family."

"You're half right. But I'm still enrolled at Berkeley, and I have no intention of flunking out. I'm doing very well in my courses."

"What are you taking?"

"Psychology and sociology, mostly. I plan to be a psychiatric social worker."

"You don't look the type."

"I am, though." The signs of early frost showed on her face again. I couldn't keep up with her moods. She was suddenly very serious. "I'm interested in helping people in trouble. I've seen a great deal of trouble. And so many people need help in the modern world."

"You can say that again."

Her clear gaze came up to my face. "You're interested in people, too, aren't you? Are you a doctor, or a lawyer?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"You mentioned a fee you earned, a thousand-dollar fee. It sounded as if you were a professional man."

"I don't know if you'd call my job a profession. I'm a private detective. My name is Archer."

Her reaction was disconcerting. She gripped the edge of the

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table with her hands and pushed herself away from it. She said in a whisper as thin and sharp as a razor, "Did Edward hire you? To spy on me?"

"Of course. Naturally. It's why I mentioned the fact that I'm a detective. I'm very cunning. And who in hell is Edward?"

"Edward Illman." She was breathing fast. "Are you sure he didn't employ you to contact me? Cross your heart?"

The waiter edged toward our table, drawn by the urgent note in her voice. "Anything the matter, lady?"

"No. It's all right, thank you. The sandwiches were fine."

She managed to give him a strained smile, and he went away with a backward look.

"I'll make a clean breast of everything," I said. "Edward employed me to feed you drugged sandwiches. The kitchen staff is in my pay, and you'll soon begin to feel the effects of the drug. After that comes the abduction, by helicopter."

"Please. You mustn't joke about such things. I wouldn't put it past him, after what he did to Ethel."

"Ethel?"

"My sister, my older sister. Ethel's a darling. But Edward doesn't think so. He hates her—he hates us both. I wouldn't be surprised if he's responsible for all this."

"All what?" I said. "We seem to be getting nowhere. Obviously you're in some sort of a bind. You want to tell me about it, I want to hear about it. Now, take a deep breath and start over, from the beginning. Bear in mind that I don't know these people from Adam. I don't even know your name."

"I'm sorry, my name is Clare Larrabee." Dutifully, she inhaled. "I've been talking like a silly fool, haven't I? It's because I'm so anxious about Ethel. I haven't heard from her for several weeks. I have no idea where she is or what's happened to her. Last week, when my allowance didn't come, I began to get really worried. I phoned her house in West Hollywood and got no answer. Since then I've been phoning at least once a day, with never an answer.

"So finally I swallowed my pride and got in touch with Edward. He said he hasn't seen her since she went to Nevada. Not that I believe him, necessarily. He'd just as soon lie as tell the truth. He perjured himself right and left when they arranged the settlement."

"Let's get Edward straight," I said. "Is he your sister's husband?"

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"He was. Ethel divorced him last month. And she's well rid of him, even if he did cheat her out of her fair share of the property. He claimed to be a pauper, practically, but I know better. He's a very successful real estate operator—you must have heard of the Illman Tracts."

"This is the same Illman?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Not personally. I used to see his name in the columns. Quite a Casanova, isn't he?"

"Edward is a dreadful man. Why Ethel ever married him . . . Of course she wanted security, to be able to send me to college, and everything. But I'd have gone to work, gladly, if I could have stopped the marriage. I could see what kind of a husband he'd make. He even had the nerve to make a—make advances to me at the wedding reception."

"And now you're thinking he had something to do with your sister's disappearance?"

"Either that, or she did away with— No, I'm sure it's Edward. He sounded so smug on the long-distance telephone yesterday, as if he'd just swallowed the canary. I tell you, that man is capable of anything. If something's happened to Ethel, I know who's responsible."

"Probably nothing has. She could have gone off on a little trip by herself."

"You don't know Ethel. We've always kept in close touch, and she's been so punctual with my allowance. She'd never dream of going away and leaving me stranded at school without any money. I held out as long as I could, expecting to hear from her. When I got down below twenty dollars, I decided to take the train home."

"To Ethel's house in West Hollywood?"

"Yes. It's the only home I have since Daddy passed away. Ethel's the only family I have. I couldn't bear to lose Ethel." Her eyes filmed with tears.

"Do you have taxi fare?"

She shook her head, shamefaced.

"I'll drive you out. I don't live far from there myself. My car's stashed in a garage near Union Station."

"You're being good to me." Her hand crept out across the table cloth and pressed the back of mine. "Forgive me for saying those silly things, about Edward hiring you."

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I told her that would be easy.

We drove out Sunset and up into the hills. Afternoon was changing into evening. The late sunlight flashed like intermittent searchlights from the western windows of the hillside apartment buildings. Clare huddled anxiously in the far corner of the seat. She didn't speak, except to direct me to her sister's house.

It was a flat-roofed building set high on a sloping lot. The walls were redwood and glass, and the redwood had not yet weathered gray. I parked on the slanting blacktop drive and got out. Both stalls of the carport under the house were empty. The draperies were pulled over the picture windows that overlooked the valley.

I knocked on the front door. The noise resounded emptily through the building. I tried it. It was locked. So was the service door at the side.

I turned to the girl at my elbow. She was clutching the handle of her overnight bag with both hands, and looking pinched again. I thought that it was a cold homecoming for her.

"Nobody home," I said.

"It's what I was afraid of. What shall I do now?"

"You share this house with your sister?"

"When I'm home from school."

"And it belongs to her?"

"Since the divorce it does."

"Then you can give me permission to break in."

"All right. But please don't damage anything if you can help it. Ethel is very proud of her house."

The side door had a spring-type lock. I took a rectangle of plastic out of my wallet and slipped it into the crack between the door and the frame. The lock slid back easily.

"You're quite a burglar," she said in an attempt at humor.

I stepped inside without answering her. The kitchen was bright and clean, but it had a slightly musty, disused odor. The bread in the breadbox was stale. The refrigerator needed defrosting. There was a piece of ham moldering on one shelf, and on another a half-empty bottle of milk which had gone sour.

"She's been gone for some time," I said. "At least a week. We should check her clothes."

"Why?"

"She'd take some along if she left to go on a trip, under her own power."

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She led me through the living room, which was simply and expensively furnished in black iron and net, into the master bedroom. The huge square bed was neatly made and covered with a pink quilted silk spread. Clare avoided looking at it, as though the conjunction of a man and a bed gave her a guilty feeling. While she went through the closet I searched the vanity and the chest of drawers.

They were barer than they should have been. Cosmetics were conspicuous by their absence. I found one thing of interest in the top drawer of the vanity, hidden under a tangle of stockings: a bankbook issued by the Las Vegas branch of the Bank of Southern California. Ethel Illman had deposited $30,000 on March 14 of this year. On March 17 she had withdrawn $5,000. On March 20 she had withdrawn $6,000. On March 22 she had withdrawn $18,995. There was a balance in her account, after service charges, of $3.65.

Clare said from the closet in a muffled voice, "A lot of her things are gone. Her mink stole, her good suits and shoes, a lot of her best summer clothes."

"Then she's probably on a vacation." I tried to keep the doubt out of my voice. A woman wandering around with $30,000 in cash was taking a big chance. I decided not to worry Clare with that, and put the little bankbook in my pocket.

"Without telling me? Ethel wouldn't do that." She came out of the closet, pushing her fine light hair back from her forehead. "You don't understand how close we are to each other, closer than sisters usually are. Ever since father died—"

"Does she drive her own car?"

"Of course. It's a last year's Buick convertible, robin's-egg blue."

"If you're badly worried, go to Missing Persons."

"No. Ethel wouldn't like that. She's a very proud person, and shy. Anyway, I have a better idea." She gave me that questioning-calculating look of hers.

"Involving me?"

"Please." Her eyes in the darkening room were like great soft centerless pansies, purple or black. "You're a detective and evidently a good one. And you're a man. You can stand up to Edward and make him answer questions. He just laughs at me. Of course I can't pay you in advance—"

"Forget the money for now. What makes you so certain that Illman is in on this?"

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"I just know he is. He threatened her in the lawyer's office the day they made the settlement. She told me so herself. Edward said that he was going to get that money back if he had to take it out of her hide. He wasn't fooling, either. He's beaten her more than once."

"How much was the settlement?"

"Thirty thousand dollars and the house and the car. She could have collected much more, hundreds of thousands, if she'd stayed in California and fought it through the courts. But she was too anxious to get free from him. So she let him cheat her and got a Nevada divorce instead. And even then he wasn't satisfied."

She looked around the abandoned bedroom, fighting back tears. Her skin was so pale that it seemed to be phosphorescent in the gloom. With a little cry she flung herself face down on the bed and gave herself over to grief.

I said to her shaking back, "You win. Where do I find him?"

He lived in a cottage hotel on the outskirts of Bel-Air. The gates of the walled pueblo were standing open, and I went in. A few couples were strolling on the gravel paths among the palm-shaded cottages, walking off the effects of the cocktail hour or working up an appetite for dinner. The women were blonde and had money on their backs. The men were noticeably older than the women, except for one, who was noticeably younger.

I passed an oval swimming pool and found Edward Illman's cottage, number twelve. Light streamed from its open French windows onto a flagstone terrace. A young woman in a narrow-waisted, billowing black gown lay on a chrome chaise at the edge of the light. With her arms hanging loose from her naked shoulders she looked like an expensive French doll which somebody had accidentally dropped there. Her face was polished and plucked and painted, expressionless as a doll's. But her eyes snapped open at the sound of my footsteps.

"Who goes there?" she said with a slight Martini accent. "Halt and give the password or I'll shoot you dead with my atomic wonder-weapon." She pointed a wavering finger at me and said, "Bing. Am I supposed to know you? I have a terrible memory for faces."

"I have a terrible face for memories. Is Mr. Illman home?"

"Uh-huh. He's in the shower. He's always taking showers. I told him he's got a scour-and-scrub neurosis, his mother was frightened

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by a washing machine." Her laughter rang like cracked bells. "If it's about business you can tell me."

"Are you his confidential secretary?"

"I was." She sat up on the chaise, looked pleased with herself. "I'm his fiancée, at the moment."

"Congratulations."

"Uh-huh. He's loaded." Smiling to herself, she got to her feet. "Are you loaded?"

"Not so it gets in my way."

She pointed her finger at me and said bing again and laughed, teetering on her four-inch heels. She started to fall forward. I caught her under the armpits.

"Too bad," she said to my chest. "I don't think you have a terrible face for memories at all. You're much prettier than old Teddy-bear."

"Thanks. I'll treasure the compliment."

I set her down on the chaise, but her arms twined round my neck like smooth white snakes and her body arched against me. She clung to me like a drowning child. I had to use force to detach myself.

"What's the matter?" she said with an up-and-under look.

A man appeared in the French windows, blotting out most of the light. In a white terry-cloth bathrobe he had the shape and bulk of a Kodiak bear. The top of his head was as bald as an ostrich egg. He carried a chip on each shoulder, like epaulets.

"What goes on?"

"Your fiancée swooned, slightly."

"Fiancée, hell. I saw what happened." Moving very quickly and light for a man of his age and weight, he pounced on the girl on the chaise and began to shake her. "Can't you keep your hands off anything in pants?"

Her head bobbed back and forth. Her teeth clicked like castanets.

I put a rough hand on his shoulder. "Leave her be."

He turned on me. "Who do you think you're talking to?"

"Edward Illman, I presume."

"And who are you?"

"The name is Archer. I'm looking into the matter of your wife's disappearance."

"I'm not married. And I have no intention of getting married. I've been burned once." He looked down sideways at the girl. She

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peered up at him in silence, hugging her shoulders.

"Your ex-wife, then," I said.

"Has something happened to Ethel?"

"I thought you might be able to tell me."

"Where did you get that idea? Have you been talking to Clare?"

I nodded.

"Don't believe her. She's got a down on me, just like her sister. Because I had the misfortune to marry Ethel, they both think I'm fair game for anything they want to pull. I wouldn't touch either one of them with an insulated pole. They're a couple of hustlers, if you want the truth. They took me for sixty grand, and what did I get out of it but headaches?"

"I thought it was thirty."

"Sixty," he said, with the money light in his eyes. "Thirty in cash, and the house is worth another thirty easily."

I looked around the place, which must have cost him a hundred dollars a day. Above the palms, the first few stars sparkled like solitaire diamonds.

"You seem to have some left."

"Sure I have. But I work for my money. Ethel was strictly from nothing when I met her. She owned the clothes on her back and what was under them and that was all. So she gives me a bad time for three years and I pay off at the rate of twenty grand a year. I ask you, is that fair?"

"I hear you threatened to get it back from her."

"You have been talking to Clare, eh? All right, so I threatened her. It didn't mean a thing. I talk too much sometimes and I have a bad temper."

"I'd never have guessed."

The girl said, "You hurt me, Teddy. I need another drink. Get me another drink, Teddy."

"Get it yourself."

She called him several bad names and wandered into the cottage, walking awkwardly like an animated doll.

He grasped my arm. "What's the trouble about Ethel? You said she disappeared. You think something's happened to her?"

I removed his hand. "She's missing. Thirty thousand in cash is also missing. There are creeps in Vegas who would knock her off for one big bill, or less."

"Didn't she bank the money? She wouldn't cash a draft for that amount and carry it around. She's crazy, but not that way."

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"She banked it all right, on March fourteenth. Then she drew it all out again in the course of the following week. When did you send her the draft?"

"The twelfth or the thirteenth. That was the agreement. She got her final divorce on March eleventh."

"And you haven't seen her since?"

"I have not. Frieda has, though."

"Frieda?"

"My secretary." He jerked a thumb toward the cottage. "Frieda went over to the house last week to pick up some of my clothes I'd left behind. Ethel was there, and she was all right then. Apparently she's taken up with another man."

"Do you know his name?"

"No, and I couldn't care less."

"Do you have a picture of Ethel?"

"I did have some. I tore them up. She's a well-stacked blonde, natural blonde. She looks very much like Clare, same coloring, but three or four years older. You should be able to get a picture from Clare. And while you're at it, tell her for me she's got a lot of gall setting the police on me. I'm a respectable businessman in this town."

He puffed out his chest under the bathrobe. It was thickly matted with brown hair, which was beginning to grizzle.

"No doubt," I said. "Incidentally, I'm not the police. I run a private agency. My name is Archer."

"So that's how it is, eh?" The planes of his broad face gleamed angrily in the light. He cocked a fat red fist. "You come here pumping me. Get out, by God, or I'll throw you out!"

"Calm down. I could break you in half."

His face swelled with blood and his eyes popped. He swung a roundhouse right at my head. I stepped inside of it and tied him up. "I said calm down, old man. You'll break a vein."

I pushed him off balance and released him. He sat down very suddenly on the chaise. Frieda was watching us from the edge of the terrace. She laughed so heartily that she spilled her drink.

Illman looked old and tired and he was breathing raucously through his mouth. He didn't try to get up. Frieda came over to me and leaned her weight on my arm.

"Why didn't you hit him," she whispered, "when you had the chance? He's always hitting other people." Her voice rose. "Teddy-bear thinks he can get away with murder."

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"Shut your yap," he said, "or I'll shut it for you."

"Button yours, muscle-man. You'll lay a hand on me once too often."

"You're fired."

"I already quit."

They were a charming couple. I was on the point of tearing myself away when a bellboy popped out of the darkness.

"A gentleman to see you, Mr. Illman."

The gentleman was a brown-faced young Highway Patrolman, who stepped forward rather diffidently into the light. "Sorry to trouble you, sir. Our San Diego office asked me to contact you as soon as possible."

Frieda looked from me to him and began to gravitate in his direction. Illman got up heavily and stepped between them.

"What is it?"

The patrolman unfolded a teletype flimsy and held it up to the light. "Are you the owner of a blue Buick convertible, last year's model?" He read off the license number.

"It was mine," Illman said. "It belongs to my ex-wife now. Did she forget to change the registration?"

"Evidently she did, Mr. Illman. In fact, she seems to've forgotten the car entirely. She left it in a parking space above the public beach in La Jolla. It's been sitting there for the last week, until we hauled it in. Where can I get in touch with Mrs. Illman?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her for some time."

The patrolman's face lengthened and turned grim. "You mean she's dropped out of sight?"

"Out of my sight, at least. Why?"

"I hate to have to say this, Mr. Illman. There's a considerable quantity of blood on the front seat of the Buick, according to this report. They haven't determined yet if it's human blood, but it raises the suspicion of foul play."

"Good heavens! It's what we've been afraid of, isn't it, Archer?" His voice was as thick as corn syrup with phony emotion. "You and Clare were right after all."

"Right about what, Mr. Illman?" The patrolman looked slightly puzzled.

"About poor Ethel," he said. "I've been discussing her disappearance with Mr. Archer here. Mr. Archer is a private detective and I was just about to engage his services to make a search for Ethel." He turned to me with a painful smile pulling his mouth to

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one side. "How much did you say you wanted in advance? Five hundred?"

"Make it two. That will buy my services for four days. It doesn't buy anything else, though."

"I understand that, Mr. Archer. I'm sincerely interested in finding Ethel for a variety of reasons, as you know."

He was a suave old fox. I almost laughed in his face. But I played along with him. I liked the idea of using his money to hang him, if possible.

"Yeah. This is a tragic occurrence for you."

He took a silver money clip shaped like a dollar sign out of his bathrobe pocket. I wondered if he didn't trust his roommate. Two bills changed hands. After a further exchange of information, the patrolman went away.

"Well," Illman said. "It looks like a pretty serious business. If you think I had anything to do with it, you're off your rocker."

"Speaking of rockers, you said your wife was crazy. What kind of crazy?"

"I was her husband, not her analyst. I wouldn't know."

"Did she need an analyst?"

"Sometimes I thought so. One week she'd be flying, full of big plans to make money. Then she'd go into a black mood and talk about killing herself." He shrugged. "It ran in her family."

"This could be an afterthought on your part."

His face reddened.

I turned to Frieda, who looked as if the news had sobered her. "Who was this fellow you saw at Ethel's house last week?"

"I dunno. She called him Owen, I think. Maybe it was his first name, maybe it was his last name. She didn't introduce us." She said it as if she felt cheated.

"Describe him?"

"Sure. A big guy, over six feet, wide in the shoulders, narrow in the beam. A smooth hunk of male. And young," with a malicious glance at Illman. "Black hair, and he had all of it, dreamy dark eyes, a cute little hairline mustache. I tabbed him for a gin-mill cowboy from Vegas, but he could be a movie star if I was a producer."

"What made you think she'd taken up with him?"

"The way he moved around the house, like he owned it. He poured himself a drink while I was there. And he was in his shirtsleeves. A real sharp dresser. Custom-made stuff."

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"You have a good eye."

"For men, she has," Illman said.

"Lay off me," she said in a hard voice, with no trace of the Martini drawl. "Or I'll really walk out on you and then where will you be?"

"Right where I am now. Sitting pretty."

"That's what you think."

I interrupted their communion. "Do you know anything about this Owen character, Illman?"

"Not a thing. He's probably some jerk she picked up in Nevada while she was sweating out the divorce."

"Have you been to San Diego recently?"

"Not for months."

"That's true," Frieda said. "I've been keeping close track of Teddy. I have to. Incidentally, it's getting late and I'm hungry. Go and put on some clothes, darling. You're prettier with clothes on."

"More than I'd say for you," he leered.

I left them and drove back to West Hollywood. The nightblooming girls and their escorts had begun to appear on the Strip. Gusts of music came from the doors that opened for them. But when I turned off Sunset, the streets were deserted.

All the lights were on in the redwood house on the hillside. I parked in the driveway and knocked on the front door. The draperies over the window beside it were pulled to one side, then fell back into place. A thin voice drifted out to me.

"Is that you, Mr. Archer?"

I said that it was. Clare opened the door inch by inch. Her face was almost haggard.

"I'm so relieved to see you."

"What's the trouble?"

"A man was watching the house. He was sitting there at the curb in a long black car. It looked like an undertaker's car. And it had a Nevada license."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It lighted up when he drove away. I saw it through the window. He only left a couple of minutes ago."

"Did you get a look at his face?"

"I'm afraid not. I didn't dare go out. I was petrified. He shined a searchlight on the window."

"Take it easy. There are plenty of big black cars in town, and quite a few Nevada licenses. He was probably looking for some

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address."

"No. I had a—a kind of a fatal feeling when I saw him. I just *know* that he's connected in some way with Ethel's disappearance. I'm scared."

She leaned against the door, breathing quickly. She looked very young and vulnerable. I said, "What am I going to do with you, kid? I can't leave you here alone."

"Are you going away?"

"I have to. I saw Edward. While I was there, he had a visitor from the HP. They found your sister's car abandoned near San Diego." I didn't mention the blood. She had enough on her mind.

"Edward killed her!" she cried. "I knew it."

"That I doubt. She may not even be dead. I'm going to San Diego to find out."

"Take me along, won't you?"

"It wouldn't be good for your reputation. Besides, you'd be in the way."

"No, I wouldn't. I promise. I have friends in San Diego. Just let me drive down there with you and I can stay with them."

"You wouldn't be making this up?"

"Honest, I have friends there. Gretchen Falk and her husband, they're good friends of Ethel's and mine. We lived in San Diego for a while, before she married Edward. The Falks will be glad to let me stay with them."

"Hadn't you better phone them first?"

"I can't. The phone's disconnected. I tried it."

"Are you sure these people exist?"

"Of course!" she said.

I gave in. I turned out the lights, locked the door, and put her bag in my car. Clare stayed very close to me.

As I was backing out, a car pulled in behind me, blocking the entrance to the driveway. I opened the door and got out. It was a black Lincoln with a searchlight mounted over the windshield.

Clare said, "He's come back."

The searchlight flashed on. Its bright beam swiveled toward me. I reached for the gun in my shoulder holster and got a firm grip on nothing. Holster and gun were packed in the suitcase in the trunk of my car. The searchlight blinded me.

A black gun emerged from the dazzle, towing a hand and an arm. They belonged to a quick-stepping cube-shaped man in a double-breasted flannel suit. A snap-brim hat was pulled down

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over his eyes. His mouth was as full of teeth as a barracuda's. It said, "Where's Dewar?"

"Never heard of him."

"Owen Dewar. You've heard of him."

The gun dragged him forward another step and collided with my breastbone. His free hand palmed my flanks. All I could see was his unchanging smile, framed in brilliant light. I felt a keen desire to do some orthodontic work on it. But the gun was an inhibiting factor.

"You must be thinking of two other parties," I said.

"No dice. This is the house and that's the broad. Out of the car, lady."

"I will not," she said in a tiny voice behind me.

"Out, or I'll blow a hole in your boy friend here."

Reluctantly she clambered out. The teeth looked down at her ankles as if they wanted to chew them. I made a move for the gun. It dived into my solar plexus, doubling me over. Its muzzle flicked the side of my head. It pushed me back against the fender of my car. I felt a worm of blood crawling past my ear.

"You coward! Leave him alone." Clare flung herself at him. He sidestepped neatly, moving on the steady pivot of the gun against my chest. She went to her knees on the blacktop.

"Get up, lady, but keep your voice down. How many boy friends you keep on the string, anyway?"

She got to her feet. "He isn't my boy friend. Who are you? Where is Ethel?"

"That's a hot one." The smile intensified. "You're Ethel. The question is, where's Dewar?"

"I don't know any Dewar."

"Sure you do, Ethel. You know him well enough to marry him. Now tell me where he is and nobody gets theirselves hurt." The flat voice dropped, and added huskily, "Only I haven't got much time to waste."

"You're wrong," she said. "You're completely mistaken. I'm not Ethel. I'm Clare. Ethel's my older sister."

He stepped back and swung the gun in a quarter circle, covering us both. "Turn your face to the light. Let's have a good look at you."

She did as she was told, striking a rigid pose. He shifted the gun to his left hand and brought a photograph out of his inside pocket. Looking from it to her face, he shook his head doubtfully.

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"I guess you're levelling at that. You're younger than this one, and thinner." He handed her the photograph. "She your sister?"

"Yes. It's Ethel.".

I caught a glimpse of the picture over her shoulder. It was a blown-up candid shot of two people. One was a pretty blonde who looked like Clare five years from now. She was leaning on the arm of a tall dark man with a hairline mustache. They were smirking at each other and there was a flower-decked altar in the background.

"Who's the man?" I said.

"Dewar. Who else?" said the teeth behind the gun. "They got married in Vegas last month. I got this picture from the Chaparral Chapel. It goes with the twenty-five dollar wedding." He snatched it out of Clare's hands and put it back in his pocket. "It took me a couple of weeks to run her down. She used her maiden name, see."

"Where did you catch up with her? San Diego?"

"I didn't catch up with her. Would I be here if I did?"

"What do you want her for?"

"I don't want her. I got nothing against the broad, except that she tied up with Dewar. He's the boy I want."

"What for?"

"You wouldn't be inarested. He worked for me at one time." The gun swiveled brightly toward Clare. "You know where your sister is?"

"No, I don't. I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"That's no way to talk now, lady. My motto's cooperation. From other people."

I said, "Her sister's been missing a week. The HP found her car in San Diego. It had bloodstains on the front seat. Are you sure you didn't catch up with her?"

"I'm asking you the questions, punk." But there was a trace of uncertainty in his voice. "What happened to Dewar if the blonde is missing?"

"I think he ran out with her money."

Clare turned to me. "You didn't tell me all this."

"I'm telling you now."

The teeth said, "She had money?"

"Plenty."

"The bum! The bum took us both, eh?"

"Dewar took you for money?"

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"You ask too many questions, punk. You'll talk yourself to death one of these days. Now stay where you are for ten minutes, both of you. Don't move, don't yell, don't telephone. I might decide to drive around the block and come back and make sure.

He backed down the brilliant alley of the searchlight beam. The door of his car slammed. All its lights went off together. It rolled away into the darkness and didn't come back.

It was past midnight when we got to San Diego, but there was still a light in the Falks's house. It was a stucco cottage on a street of identical cottages in Pacific Beach.

"We lived here once," Clare said. "When I was going to high school. That house, second from the corner." Her voice was nostalgic and she looked around the jerry-built tract as if it represented something precious to her. The pre-Illman era in her young life.

I knocked on the front door. A big henna-head in a housecoat opened it on a chain. But when she saw Clare beside me, she flung the door wide.

"Clare honey, where you been? I've been trying to phone you in Berkeley, and here you are. How are you, honey?"

She opened her arms and Clare walked into them.

"Oh, Gretchen," she said with her face on the redhead's breast. "Something's happened to Ethel, something terrible."

"I know it, honey, but it could be worse."

"Worse than murder?"

"She isn't murdered. Put that out of your mind. She's pretty badly hurt, but she isn't murdered."

Clare stood back to look at her face. "You've seen her? Is she here?"

The redhead put a finger to her mouth, which was big and generous-looking, like the rest of her. "Hush, Clare. Jake's asleep, he has to get up early, go to work. Yeah, I've seen her, but she isn't here. She's in a nursing home over on the other side of town."

"You said she's badly hurt?"

"Pretty badly beaten, yeah, poor dear. But the doctor told me she's pulling out of it fine. A little plastic surgery and she'll be as good as new."

"Plastic surgery?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid she'll need it. I got a look at her face tonight,

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when they changed the bandages. Now take it easy, honey. It could be worse."

"Who did it to her?"

"That lousy husband of hers."

"Edward?"

"Heck, no. The other one. The one that calls himself Dewar, Owen Dewar."

I said, "Have you seen Dewar?"

"I saw him a week ago, the night he beat her up, the dirty rotten bully." Her deep contralto growled in her throat. "I'd like to get my hands on him just for five minutes."

"So would a lot of people, Mrs. Falk."

She glanced inquiringly at Clare. "Who's your friend? You haven't introduced us."

"I'm sorry. Mr. Archer, Mrs. Falk. Mr. Archer is a detective, Gretchen."

"I was wondering. Ethel didn't want me to call the police. I told her she ought to, but she said no. The poor darling's so ashamed of herself, getting mixed up with that kind of a louse. She didn't even get in touch with *me* until tonight. Then she saw in the paper about her car being picked up, and she thought maybe I could get it back for her without any publicity. Publicity is what she doesn't want most. I guess it's a tragic thing for a beautiful girl like Ethel to lose her looks."

I said, "There won't be any publicity if I can help it. Did you go to see the police about her car?"

"Jake advised me not to. He said it would blow the whole thing wide open. And the doctor told me he was kind of breaking the law by not reporting the beating she took. So I dropped it."

"How did this thing happen?"

"I'll tell you all I know about it. Come on into the living room, kids, let me fix you something to drink."

Clare said, "You're awfully kind, Gretchen, but I must go to Ethel. Where is she?"

"The Mission Rest Home. Only don't you think you better wait till morning? It's a private hospital, but it's late for visitors."

"I've got to see her," Clare said. "I couldn't sleep a wink if I didn't. I've been so worried about her."

Gretchen heaved a sigh. "Whatever you say, honey. We can try, anyway. Give me a second to put on a dress and I'll show you where the place is."

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She led us into the darkened living room, turned the television set off and the lights on. A quart of beer, nearly full, stood on a coffee table beside the scuffed sofa. She offered me a glass, which I accepted gratefully. Clare refused. She was so tense she couldn't even sit down.

We stood and looked at each other for a minute. Then Gretchen came back, struggling with a zipper on one massive hip.

"All set, kids. You better drive, Mr. Archer. I had a couple of quarts to settle my nerves. You wouldn't believe it, but I've gained five pounds since Ethel came down here. I always gain weight when I'm anxious."

We went out to my car, and turned toward the banked lights of San Diego. The women rode in the front seat. Gretchen's opulent flesh was warm against me.

"Was Ethel here before it happened?" I said.

"Sure she was, for a day. Ethel turned up here eight or nine days ago. Tuesday of last week it was. I hadn't heard from her for several months, since she wrote me that she was going to Nevada for a divorce. It was early in the morning when she drove up—in fact, she got me out of bed. The minute I saw her, I knew that something was wrong. The poor kid was scared, really scared. She was as cold as a corpse and her teeth were chattering. So I fed her some coffee and put her in a hot tub, and after that she told me what it was that'd got her down."

"Dewar?"

"You said it, mister. Ethel never was much of a picker. When she was hostessing at the Grant coffee shop back in the old days, she was always falling for the world's worst phonies. Speaking of phonies, this Dewar takes the cake. She met him in Las Vegas when she was waiting for her divorce from Illman. He was a big promoter, to hear him tell it. She fell for the story, and she fell for him. A few days after she got her final decree, she married him. Big romance. Big deal.

"They were going to be business partners, too. He said he had some money to invest, twenty-five thousand or so, and he knew of a swell little hotel in Acapulco that they could buy at a steal for fifty thousand. The idea was that they should each put up half, and go and live in Mexico in the lap of luxury for the rest of their lives. He didn't show her any of his money, but she believed him. She drew her settlement money out of the bank and came to L.A. with him to close up her house and get set for the deal."

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"He must have hypnotized her," Clare said. "Ethel's a smart businesswoman."

"Not with something tall, dark, and handsome, honey. I give him that much. He's got the looks. Well, they lived in L.A. for a couple of weeks, on Ethel's money of course, and he kept putting off the Mexican trip. He didn't want to go anywhere, in fact—just sit around the house and drink her liquor and eat her good cooking."

"He was hiding out," I said.

"From what? The police?"

"Worse than that. Some gangster pal from Nevada was gunning for him, still is. Ethel wasn't the only one he fleeced."

"Nice guy, eh? Anyway, Ethel started to get restless. She didn't like sitting around with all that money in the house, waiting for nothing. Last Monday night—a week ago Monday, that is—she had a showdown with him. Then it all came out. He didn't have any money or anything else. He wasn't a promoter, he didn't know of any hotel in Acapulco. His whole buildup was as queer as a three-dollar bill. Apparently he made his living gambling, but he was even all washed up with that. Nothing. But she was married to him now, he said, and she was going to sit still and like it or he'd knock her block off.

"He meant it, too, Ethel said. She's got the proof of it now. She waited until he drank himself to sleep that night, then she threw some things in a bag, including her twenty-five thousand, and came down here. She was on her way to get a quickie divorce in Mexico, but Jake and me talked her into staying for a while and thinking it over. Jake said she could probably get an annulment right in California, and that would be more legal."

"He was probably right."

"Yeah? Maybe it wasn't such a bright idea after all. We kept her here just long enough for Dewar to catch her. Apparently she left some letters behind and he ran down the list of her friends until he found her at our place. He talked her into going for a drive to talk it over. I didn't hear what was said—they were in her room—but he must have used some powerful persuasion. She went out of the house with him as meek as a lamb and they drove away in her car.

"That was the last I saw of her until she got in touch with me tonight. When she didn't come back I wanted to call the police, but Jake wouldn't let me. He said I had no business coming be-

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tween a man and his wife and all that guff. I gave Jake a piece of my mind tonight on that score. I ought to've called the cops as soon as Dewar showed his sneaking face on our front porch."

"What exactly did he do to her?"

"He gave her a bad clobbering, that's obvious. Ethel didn't want to talk about it much tonight. The subject was painful to her in more ways than one."

"Did he take her money?"

"He must have. It's gone. So is he."

We were on the freeway which curved past the hills of Balboa Park. The trees of its man-made jungle were restless against the sky. Below us on the other side, the city sloped like a frozen cascade of lights down to the black concavity of the bay.

The Mission Rest Home was in the eastern suburbs, an old stucco mansion which had been converted into a private hospital. The windows in its thick stucco walls were small and barred and there were lights in some of them.

I rang the doorbell. Clare was so close to my back I could feel her breath. A woman in a purple flannelette wrapper opened the door. Her hair hung in two gray braids, which were ruler-straight. Her hard black eyes surveyed the three of us, and stayed on Gretchen.

"What is it now, Mrs. Falk?" she said brusquely.

"This is Mrs.—Miss Larrabee's sister Clare."

"Miss Larrabee is probably sleeping. She shouldn't be disturbed."

"I know it's late," Clare said in a tremulous voice. "But I've come all the way from San Francisco to see her."

"She's doing well, I assure you of that. She's completely out of danger."

"Can't I just go in for a teensy visit? Ethel will want to see me, and Mr. Archer has some questions to ask her. Mr. Archer is a private detective."

"This is very irregular." Reluctantly she opened the door. "Wait here and I'll see if she is awake. Please keep your voices down. We have other patients."

We waited in a dim high-ceilinged room which had once been the reception room of the mansion. The odors of mustiness and medication blended depressingly in the stagnant air.

"I wonder what brought her here," I said.

"She knew old lady Lestina," Gretchen said. "She stayed with

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her at one time, when Mrs. Lestina was running a boarding-house."

"Of course," Clare said. "I remember the name. That was when Ethel was going to San Diego State. Then Daddy got killed and she had to drop out of school and go to work." Tears glimmered in her eyes. "Poor Ethel. She's always tried so hard, and been so good to me."

Gretchen patted her shoulder. "You bet she has, honey. Now you have a chance to be good to her."

"Oh, I will. I'll do everything I can."

Mrs. Lestina appeared in the arched doorway. "She's not asleep. I guess you can talk to her for a very few minutes."

We followed her to a room at the end of one wing of the house. A white-uniformed nurse was waiting at the door. "Don't say anything to upset her, will you? She's always fighting sedation as it is."

The room was large but poorly furnished, with a mirrorless bureau, a couple of rickety chairs, a brown-enameled hospital bed. The head on the raised pillow was swathed in bandages through which tufts of blonde hair were visible. The woman sat up and spread her arms. The white of her eyes were red, suffused with blood from broken vessels. Her swollen lips opened and said, "Clare!" in a tone of incredulous joy.

The sisters hugged each other, with tears and laughter. "It's wonderful to see you," the older one said through broken teeth. "How did you get here so fast?"

"I came to stay with Gretchen. Why didn't you call me, Ethel? I've been worried sick about you."

"I'm dreadfully sorry, darling. I should have, shouldn't I? I didn't want you to see me like this. And I've been so ashamed of myself. I've been such a terrible fool. I've lost our money."

The nurse was standing against the door, torn between her duty and her feelings. "Now you promised not to get excited, Miss Larrabee."

"She's right," Clare said. "Don't give it a second thought. I'm going to leave school and get a job and look after you. You need some looking after for a change."

"Nuts. I'll be fine in a couple of weeks." The brave voice issuing from the mask was deep and vibrant. "Don't make any rash decisions, kiddo. The head is bloody but unbowed." The sisters looked at each other in the silence of deep affection.

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I stepped forward to the bedside and introduced myself. "How did this happen to you, Miss Larrabee?"

"It's a long story," she lisped, "and a sordid one."

"Mrs. Falk has told me most of it up to the point when Dewar made you drive away with him. Where did he take you?"

"To the beach—I think it was in La Jolla. It was late and there was nobody there and the tide was coming in. And Owen had a gun. I was terrified. I didn't know what more he wanted from me. He already had my twenty-five thousand."

"He had the money?"

"Yes. It was in my room at Gretchen's house. He made me give it to him before we left there. But it didn't satisfy him. He said I hurt his pride by leaving him. He said he had to satisfy his pride." Contempt ran through her voice like a thin steel thread.

"By beating you up?"

"Apparently. He hit me again and again. I think he left me for dead. When I came to, the waves were splashing on me. I managed somehow to get up to the car. It wasn't any good to me, though, because Owen had the keys. It's funny he didn't take it."

"Too easily traced," I said. "What did you do then?"

"I hardly know. I think I sat in the car for a while wondering what to do. Then a taxi went by and I stopped him and told him to bring me here."

"You weren't very wise not to call the police. They might have got your money back. Now it's a cold trail."

"Did you come here to lecture me?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"I was half crazy with pain," she said. "I hardly knew what I was doing. I couldn't bear to have anybody see me."

Her fingers were active among the folds of the sheets. Clare reached out and stroked her hands into quietness. "Now, now, darling," she crooned. "Nobody's criticizing you. You take things nice and easy for a while, and Clare will look after you."

The masked head rolled on the pillow. The nurse came forward, her face solicitous. "I think Miss Larrabee has had enough."

She showed us out. Clare lingered with her sister for a moment, then followed us to the car. She sat between us in brooding silence all the way to Pacific Beach. Before I dropped them off at Gretchen's house, I asked for her permission to go to the police. She wouldn't give it to me, and nothing I could say would change her mind.

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I spent the rest of the night in a motor court, trying to crawl over the threshold of sleep. Shortly after dawn I disentangled myself from the twisted sheets and drove out to La Jolla.

La Jolla is a semi-detached suburb of San Diego, a small resort town half surrounded by sea. It was a gray morning. The slanting streets were scoured with the sea's cold breath, and the sea itself looked like hammered pewter.

I warmed myself with a short-order breakfast and went the rounds of the hotels and motels. No one resembling Dewar had registered in the past week. I tried the bus and taxi companies. Dewar must have slipped out of town unnoticed. But I did get a lead on the taxi driver who had taken Ethel to the Mission Rest Home. He had mentioned the injured woman to his dispatcher, and the dispatcher gave me his name and address. Stanley Simpson, 38 Calle Laureles.

Simpson was a paunchy, defeated-looking man who hadn't shaved for a couple of days. He came to the door of his tiny bungalow in his underwear, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. "What's the pitch, bub? If you got me up to try and sell me something, you're in for a disappointment."

I told him who I was and why I was there. "Do you remember the woman?"

"I hope to tell you I do. She was bleeding like a stuck pig, all over the back seat. It took me a couple of hours to clean it off. Somebody pistol-whipped her, if you ask me. I wanted to take her to the hospital, but she said no. Hell, I couldn't argue with her in that condition. Did I do wrong?"

"If you did, it doesn't matter. She's being taken good care of. I thought you might have got a glimpse of the man that did it to her."

"Not me, mister. She was all by herself, nobody else in sight. She got out of a parked car and staggered out into the road. I couldn't just leave her there, could I?"

"Of course not. You're a Good Samaritan, Simpson. Exactly where did you pick her up?"

"Down by the Cove. She was sitting in this Buick. I dropped a party off at the beach club and I was on my way back, kind of cruising along—"

"What time?"

"Around ten o'clock, I guess it was. I can check my schedule."

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"It isn't important. Incidentally, did she pay you for the ride?"

"Yeah, she had a buck and some change in her purse. She had a hard time making it. No tip," he added gloomily.

"Tough cheese."

His fogged eyes brightened. "You're a friend of hers, aren't you? Wouldn't you say I rate a tip on a run like that? I always say, better late than never."

"Is that what you always say?" I handed him a dollar.

The Cove was a roughly semicircular inlet at the foot of a steep hill surmounted by a couple of hotels. Its narrow curving beach and the street above it were both deserted. An off-shore wind had swept away the early morning mist, but the sky was still cloudy, and the sea grim. The long swells slammed the beach like stone walls falling, and broke in foam on the rocks that framed the entrance to the Cove.

I sat in my car and watched them. I was at a dead end. This seaswept place, under this iron sky, was like the world's dead end. Far out at sea a carrier floated like a chip on the horizon. A Navy jet took off from it and scrawled tremendous nothings on the distance.

Something bright caught my eye. It was in the trough of a wave a couple of hundred yards outside the Cove. Then it was on a crest: the aluminum air-bottle of an Aqua-lung strapped to a naked brown back. Its wearer was prone on a surfboard, kicking with blackfinned feet toward the shore.

He was kicking hard, and paddling with one arm, but he was making slow progress. His other arm dragged in the opaque water. He seemed to be towing something, something heavy. I wondered if he had speared a shark or a porpoise. His face was inscrutable behind his glass mask.

I left my car and climbed down to the beach. The man on the surfboard came toward me with his tiring one-armed stroke, climbing the walled waves and sliding down them. A final surge picked him up and set him on the sand, almost at my feet. I dragged his board out of the backwash and helped him to pull the line that he was holding in one hand. His catch was nothing native to the sea. It was a man.

The end of the line was looped around his body under the armpits. He lay face down like an exhausted runner, a big man, fully clothed in soggy tweeds. I turned him over and saw the

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aquiline profile, the hairline mustache over the blue mouth, the dark eyes clogged with sand. Owen Dewar had made his escape by water.

The skindiver took off his mask and sat down heavily, his chest working like a great furred bellows. "I go down for abalone," he said between breaths. "I find this. Caught between two rocks at thirty-forty feet."

"How long has he been in the water?"

"It's hard to tell. I'd say a couple of days, anyway. Look at his color. Poor stiff. But I wish they wouldn't drown themselves in my hunting grounds."

"Do you know him?"

"Nope. Do you?"

"Never saw him before," I said, with truth.

"How about you phoning the police, Mac? I'm pooped. And unless I make a catch I don't eat today. There's no pay in fishing for corpses."

"In a minute."

I went through the dead man's pockets. There was a set of car keys in his jacket pocket and an alligator wallet on his hip. It contained no money, but the driver's license was decipherable: Owen Dewar, Mesa Court, Las Vegas. I put the wallet back, and let go of the body. The head rolled sideways. I saw the small hole in his neck, washed clean by the sea.

"Holy Mother!" the diver said, "He was shot."

I got back to the Falk house around midmorning. The sun had burned off the clouds and the day was turning hot. By daylight the long treeless street of identical houses looked cheap and rundown. It was part of the miles of suburban slums that the war had scattered all over Southern California.

Gretchen was sprinkling the brown front lawn with a desultory hose. She looked too big for the pocket-handkerchief yard. The sunsuit that barely covered her various bulges made her look even bigger. She turned off the water when I got out of my car.

"What gives? You've got trouble on your face if I ever saw trouble."

"Dewar is dead. Murdered. A skindiver found him in the sea off La Jolla."

She took it calmly. "That's not such bad news, is it? He had it coming. Who killed him?"

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"I told you a gunman from Nevada was on his trail. Maybe he caught him. Anyway, Dewar was shot and bled to death from a neck wound. Then he was dumped in the ocean. I had to lay the whole thing on the line for the police, since there's murder in it."

"You told them what happened to Ethel?"

"I had to. They're at the rest home talking to her now."

"What about Ethel's money? Was the money on him?"

"Not a trace of it. And he didn't live to spend it. The police pathologist thinks he's been dead for a week. Whoever got Dewar got the money at the same time."

"Will she ever get it back, do you think?"

"If we can catch the murderer and he still has it with him. That's a big if. Where's Clare, by the way? With her sister?"

"Clare went back to L.A."

"What for?"

"Don't ask me." She shrugged her rosy shoulders. "She got Jake to drive her down to the station before he went to work. I wasn't up. She didn't even tell me she was going." Gretchen seemed peeved.

"Did she get a telegram or a phone call?"

"Nothing. All I know is what Jake told me. She talked him into lending her ten bucks. I wouldn't mind so much, but it was all the ready cash we had, until payday. Oh, well, I guess we'll get it back, if Ethel recovers her money."

"You'll get it back," I said. "Clare seems to be a straight kid."

"That's what I always used to think. When they lived here, before Ethel met Illman and got into the chips, Clare was just about the nicest kid on the block. In spite of all the trouble in her family."

"What trouble was that?"

"Her father shot himself. Didn't you know? They said it was an accident, but the people on the street—we knew different. Mr. Larrabee was never the same after his wife left him. He spent his time brooding, drinking and brooding. Clare reminded me of him, the way she behaved last night after you left. She wouldn't talk to me or look at me. She shut herself up in her room and acted real cold. If you want the honest truth, I don't like her using my home as if it was a motel and Jake was a taxi service. The least she could of done was say goodbye to me."

"It sounds as if she had something on her mind."

All the way back to Los Angeles I wondered what it was. It

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took me a little over two hours to drive from San Diego to West Hollywood. The black Lincoln with the searchlight and the Nevada license plates was standing at the curb below the redwood house. The front door of the house was standing open.

I transferred my automatic from the suitcase to my jacket pocket, making sure that it was ready to fire. I climbed the terraced lawn beside the driveway. My feet made no sound in the grass. When I reached the porch I heard voices from inside. One was the gunman's hoarse and deathly monotone.

"I'm taking it, sister. It belongs to me."

"You're a liar."

"Sure, but not about this. The money is mine."

"It's my sister's money. What right have you got to it?"

"This. Dewar stole it from me. He ran a poker game for me in Vegas, a high-stakes game in various hotels around town. He was a good dealer and I trusted him with the house take. I let it pile up for a week, that was my mistake. I should've kept a closer watch on him. He ran out on me with twenty-five grand or more. That's the money you're holding, lady."

"I don't believe it. You can't prove that story. It's fantastic."

"I don't have to prove it. Gelt talks, but iron talks louder. So hand it over, eh?"

"I'll die first."

"Maybe you will at that."

I edged along the wall to the open door. Clare was standing flat against the opposite wall of the hallway. She was clutching a sheaf of bills to her breast. The gunman's broad flannel back was to me, and he was advancing on her.

"Stay away from me, you." Her cry was thin and desperate. She was trying to merge with the wall, pressed by terror.

"I don't like taking candy from a baby," he said in a very reasonable tone. "Only I'm going to have that money back."

"You can't have it. It's Ethel's. It's all she has."

He raised his armed right hand and slapped the side of her face with the gun barrel, lightly. Fingering the welt it left, she said in a kind of despairing stupor, "You're the one that hurt Ethel, aren't you? You like hurting people, don't you?"

"Listen to reason, lady. It ain't just the money, it's a matter of business. I let it happen once, it'll happen again. I can't afford to let anybody get away with nothing. I got a reputation to live up to."

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I said from the doorway, "Is that why you killed Dewar?"

He let out an animal sound and whirled in my direction. I shot before he did, twice. The first slug rocked him back on his heels. His bullet went wild, plowed the ceiling. My second slug took him off balance and slammed him against the wall. His blood spattered Clare and the money in her hands. She screamed once.

The man from Las Vegas dropped his gun. It clattered on the parquetry. His hands clasped his perforated chest, trying to hold the blood in. He slid down the wall slowly, his face a mask of smiling pain, and sat with a bump on the floor. He blew red bubbles and said, "You got me wrong, I didn't kill Dewar. I didn't know he was dead. The money belongs to me. You made a big mistake, punk."

"So did you."

He went on smiling, as if in fierce appreciation of the joke. Then his red grin changed to a rictus, and he slumped sideways.

Clare looked from him to me, her eyes wide and dark with the sight of death. "I don't know how to thank you. He was going to kill me."

"I doubt that. He was just combining a little pleasure with business."

"But he shot at you."

"It's just as well he did. It leaves no doubt that it was self-defense."

"Is it true what you said? That Dewar's dead? He killed him?"

"You tell me."

"What do you mean?"

"You've got the money that Dewar took from your sister. Where did you get it?"

"It was here, in the house. I found it in the kitchen."

"That's kind of hard to swallow, Clare."

"It's true." She looked down at the blood-spattered money in her hands. The outside bill was a hundred. Unconsciously she tried to wipe it clean on the front of her dress. "He had it hidden here. He must have come back and hid it."

"Show me where."

"You're not being very nice to me. And I'm not feeling well."

"Neither is Dewar. You didn't shoot him yourself, by any chance?"

"How could I? I was in Berkeley when it happened. I wish I was back there now."

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"You know when it happened, do you?"

"No." She bit her lip. "I don't mean that. I mean I was in Berkeley all along. You're a witness, you were with me on the train coming down."

"Trains run both ways."

She regarded me with loathing. "You're not nice at all. To think that yesterday I thought you were nice."

"You're wasting time, Clare. I have to call the police. But first I want to see where you found the money. Or where you say you did."

"In the kitchen. You've got to believe me. It took me a long time to get here from the station on the bus. I'd only just found it when he walked in on me."

"I'll believe the physical evidence, if any."

To my surprise the physical evidence was there. A red-enameled flour canister was standing open on the board beside the kitchen sink. There were fingerprints on the flour and a floury piece of oilskin wrapping in the sink.

"He hid the money under the flour," Clare said. "I guess he thought it would be safer here than if he carried it around with him."

It wasn't a likely story. On the other hand, the criminal mind is capable of strange things. Whose criminal mind, I wondered: Clare's or Owen Dewar's or somebody else's?

"Where did you get the bright idea of coming back here and looking for it?"

"Ethel suggested it last night, just before I left her. She told me this was his favorite hiding place while she was living with him. She discovered it by accident one day."

"Hiding place for what?"

"Some kind of drug he took. He was a drug addict. Do you still think I'm lying?"

"Somebody is. But I suppose I've got to take your word until I get something better. What are you going to do with the money?"

"Ethel said if I found it, that I was to put it in the bank."

"There's no time for that now. You better let me hold it for you. I have a safe in my office."

"No. You don't trust me. Why should I trust you?"

"Because you can trust me, and you know it. If the cops impound it you'll have to prove ownership to get it back."

She was too spent to argue She let me take it out of her hands.

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I riffled through the bills and got a rough idea of their sum. There was easily twenty-five thousand there. I gave her a receipt for that amount and put the sheaf of bills in my inside pocket.

It was after dark when the cops got through with me. By that time I was equipped to do a comparative study on the San Diego and Los Angeles P.D.'s. With the help of a friend in the D.A.'s office, Clare's eyewitness account, and the bullet in the ceiling, I got away from them without being booked.

The dead man's record also helped. He had been widely suspected of shooting Bugsy Siegel, and had fallen heir to some of Siegel's holdings. His name was Jack Fidelis. R.I.P.

I drove out Sunset to my office. The Strip was lighting up for business again. The stars looked down on its neon conflagration like hard bright knowing eyes. I pulled the Venetian blinds and locked the doors and counted the money: $26,380.

I wrapped it up in brown paper, sealed it with wax, and tucked it away in the safe. I would have preferred to tear it in little pieces and flush the green confetti down the drain. Two men had died for it. I wasn't eager to become the third.

I had a steak in the restaurant at International Airport, then hopped a shuttle plane to Las Vegas. There I spent a rough night in various gambling joints, watching the suckers blow their vacation money, pinching my own pennies, and talking to some of the guys and girls that raked the money in. The rest of Illman's two hundred dollars bought me the facts I needed.

I flew back to Los Angeles in the morning, picked up my car, and headed for San Diego. I was tired enough to sleep standing up, like a horse. But something heavier than sleep or tiredness sat on the back of my neck and pressed the gas pedal down to the floorboards. It was the thought of Clare.

Clare was with her sister in the Mission Rest Home. She was waiting outside the closed door of Ethel's room when Mrs. Lestina took me down the hall. She looked as if she had passed a rougher night than mine. Her grooming was careless, hair uncombed, mouth unpainted. The welt from Fidelis' gun had turned blue and spread to one puffed eye. And I thought how very little it took to break a young girl down into a tramp, if she was vulnerable, or twist her into something worse than a tramp.

"Did you bring it?" she said as soon as Mrs. Lestina was out of earshot. "Ethel's angry with me for turning it over to you."

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"I'm not surprised."

"Give it to me. Please." Her hand clawed at my sleeve. "Isn't that what you came for, to give it back to me?"

"It's in the safe in my office in Los Angeles. That is, if you're talking about the money."

"What else would I be talking about? You'll simply have to go back there and get it. Ethel can't leave here without it. She needs to pay her bill."

"Is Ethel planning to go some place?"

"I persuaded her to come back to Berkeley with me. She'll have better care in the hospital there, and I know of a good plastic surgeon—"

"It'll take more than that to put Ethel back together again."

"What do you mean?"

"You should be able to guess. You're not a stupid girl, or are you? Has she got you fooled the way she had me fooled?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. But I don't like it. Every time I see you, you seem to get nastier."

"This is a nasty business. It's rubbing off on all of us, isn't it, kid?"

She looked at me vaguely through a fog of doubt. "Don't you dare call me kid. I thought you were a real friend for a while, but you don't even like me. You've said some dreadful things. You probably think you can scare me into letting you keep our money. Well, you can't."

"That's my problem," I said. "What to do with the money."

"You'll give it back to Ethel and me, that's what you'll do. There are laws to deal with people like you—"

"And people like Ethel. I want to talk to her."

"I won't let you. My sister's suffered enough already."

She spread her arms across the width of the door. I was tempted to go away and send her the money and forget the whole thing. But the need to finish it pushed me, imperative as a gun at my back.

I lifted her by the waist and tried to set her aside. Her entire body was rigid and jerking galvanically. Her hands slid under my arms and around my neck and held on. Her head rolled on my shoulder and was still.

Suddenly, like delayed rain after lightning, her tears came. I stood and held her vibrating body, trying to quench the dangerous heat rising in my veins, and wondering what I was going to do.

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"Ethel did it for me," she sobbed. "She wanted me to have a good start in life."

"Some start she's giving you. Did she tell you that?"

"She didn't have to. I knew. I tried to pretend to myself, but I knew. When she told me where to look for the money last night—the night before last."

"You knew Ethel took it from Dewar and hid it in her house?"

"Yes. The thought went through my mind and I couldn't get rid of it. Ethel's always taken terrible chances, and money means so much to her. Not for herself. For me."

"She wasn't thinking of you when she gambled away the money she got from Illman. She went through it in a week."

"Is that what happened to it?"

"That's it. I flew to Las Vegas last night and talked to some of the people that got her money, dealers and stickmen. They remembered her. She had a bad case of gambling fever that week. It didn't leave her until the money was gone. Then maybe she thought of you."

"Poor Ethel. I've seen her before when she had a gambling streak."

"Poor Dewar," I said.

The door beside us creaked open. The muzzle of a blue revolver looked out. Above it Ethel's eyes glared red from her bandaged face.

"Come in here, both of you."

Clare stretched out her hands towards her sister. "No, Ethel. Darling, you mustn't. Give me that gun."

"I have a use for it. I know what I'm doing."

She backed away, supporting herself on the doorknob.

I said to Clare, "We better do as she says. She won't hurt you."

"Not unless you make me. Don't reach for your gun, and don't try anything funny. You know what happened to Dewar."

"Not as well as you do."

"Don't waste any tears on that one. Save them for yourself. Now get in here." The gun wagged peremptorily.

I edged past her with Clare at my back. Ethel shut the door and moved to the bed, her eyes never leaving mine. She sat on its edge and supported the elbow of her gun arm on her knee, hunched far over like an aged wreck of a woman.

It was strange to see the fine naked legs dangling below her hospital gown. Her voice was low and resonant.

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"I don't like to do this. But how am I going to make you see it my way if I don't? I want Clare to see it, too. It was self-defense, understand. I didn't intend to kill him. I never expected to see him again. Fidelis was after him and it was only a matter of time until he caught up with Owen. Owen knew that. He told me himself he wouldn't live out the year. He was so sure of it he was paralyzed. He got so he wouldn't even go out of the house.

"Somebody had to make a move, and I decided it might as well be me. Why should I sit and wait for Fidelis to come and take the money back and blow Owen's head off for him? It was really my money, anyway, mine and Clare's."

"Leave me out of this," Clare said.

"But you don't understand, honey," the damaged mouth insisted. "It really was my money. We were legally married, so what was his was mine. I talked him into taking it in the first place. He'd never have had the guts to do it alone. He thought Fidelis was God himself. I didn't. But I didn't want to be there when Jack Fidelis found him. So I left him.

"I took the money out of his pillow when he was asleep and hid it where he'd never look for it. Then I drove down here. I guess you know the rest. He found a letter from Gretchen in the house and traced me through it. He thought I was carrying the money. When it turned out that I wasn't, he took me out to the beach and beat me up. I wouldn't tell him where it was. He threatened to shoot me then. I fought him for the gun and it went off. It was a clear case of self-defense."

"Maybe it was. You'll never get a jury to believe it, though. Innocent people don't dump their shooting victims in the drink."

"But I didn't. The tide was coming in. I didn't even touch him after he died. He just lay there and the water took him."

"While you stood and watched?"

"I couldn't get away. I was so weak I couldn't move for a long time. Then when I finally could, it was too late. He was gone, and he had the keys to the car."

"He drove you out to La Jolla, did he? And held a gun on you at the same time. That's quite a trick."

"He did, though," she said. "That is the way it happened."

"I hear you telling me, Mrs. Dewar."

She winced behind her mask at the sound of her name. "I'm not Mrs. Dewar," she said. "I've taken back my maiden name. I'm Ethel Larrabee."

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"We won't argue about the name. You'll be trading it in for a number, anyway."

"I don't think I will. The shooting was self-defense, and once he was dead the money belonged to me. There's no way of proving he stole it, now that Fidelis is gone. I guess I owe you a little thanks for that."

"Put down your gun, then."

"I'm not that grateful," she said.

Clare moved across the room toward her. "Let me look at the gun, Ethel. It's father's revolver, isn't it?"

"Be quiet, you little fool."

"I won't be quiet. These things have to be said. You're way off by yourself, Ethel, I'm not with you. I want no part of this, or the money. You don't understand how strange and dreadful—"

Her voice broke. She stood a few feet from her sister, held back by the gun's menace, yet strongly drawn toward it. "That's father's revolver, isn't it? The one he shot himself with?"

"What if it is?"

"I'll tell you, Ethel Larrabee," I said. "Dewar didn't pull a gun on you. You were the one that had the gun. You forced him to drive you out to the beach and shot him in cold blood. But he didn't die right away. He lived long enough to leave his marks on you. Isn't that how it happened?"

The bandaged face was silent. I looked into the terrible eyes for assent. They were lost and wild, like an animal's.

"Is that true, Ethel? Did you murder him?" Clare looked down at her sister with pity and terror.

"I did it for you," the masked face said. "I always tried to do what was best for you. Don't you believe me? Don't you know I love you? Ever since father killed himself I've tried—"

Clare turned and walked to the wall and stood with her forehead against it. Ethel put the muzzle of the gun in her mouth. Her broken teeth clenched on it the way a smoker bites on a pipestem. The bone and flesh of her head muffled its roar.

I laid her body out on the bed and pulled a sheet up over it.

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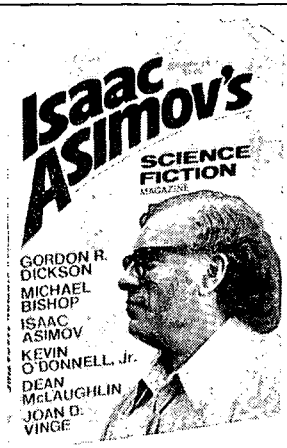

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